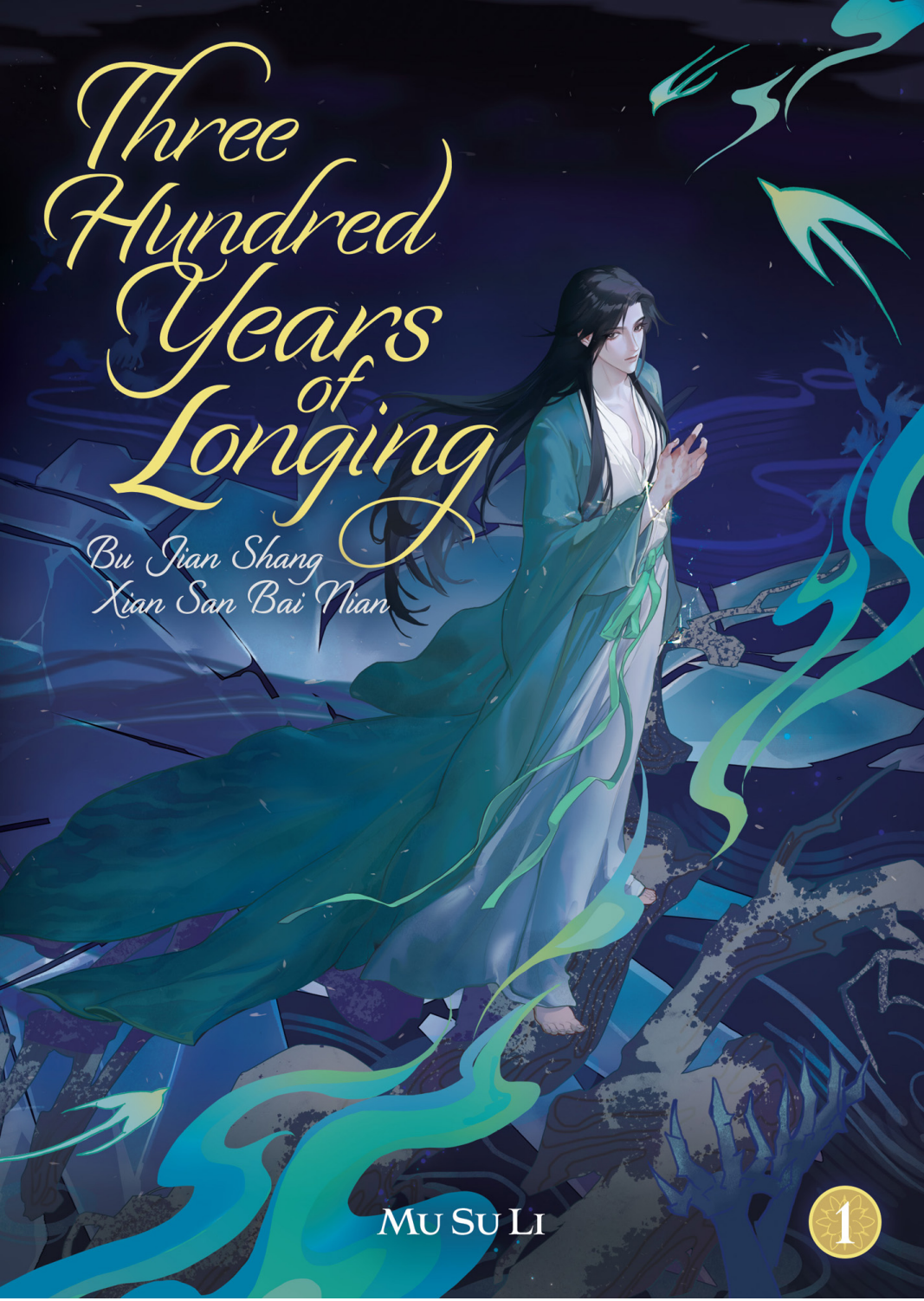
Three Hundred Years of Longing
Bu Jian Shang Xian San Bai Nian
Mu Su Li
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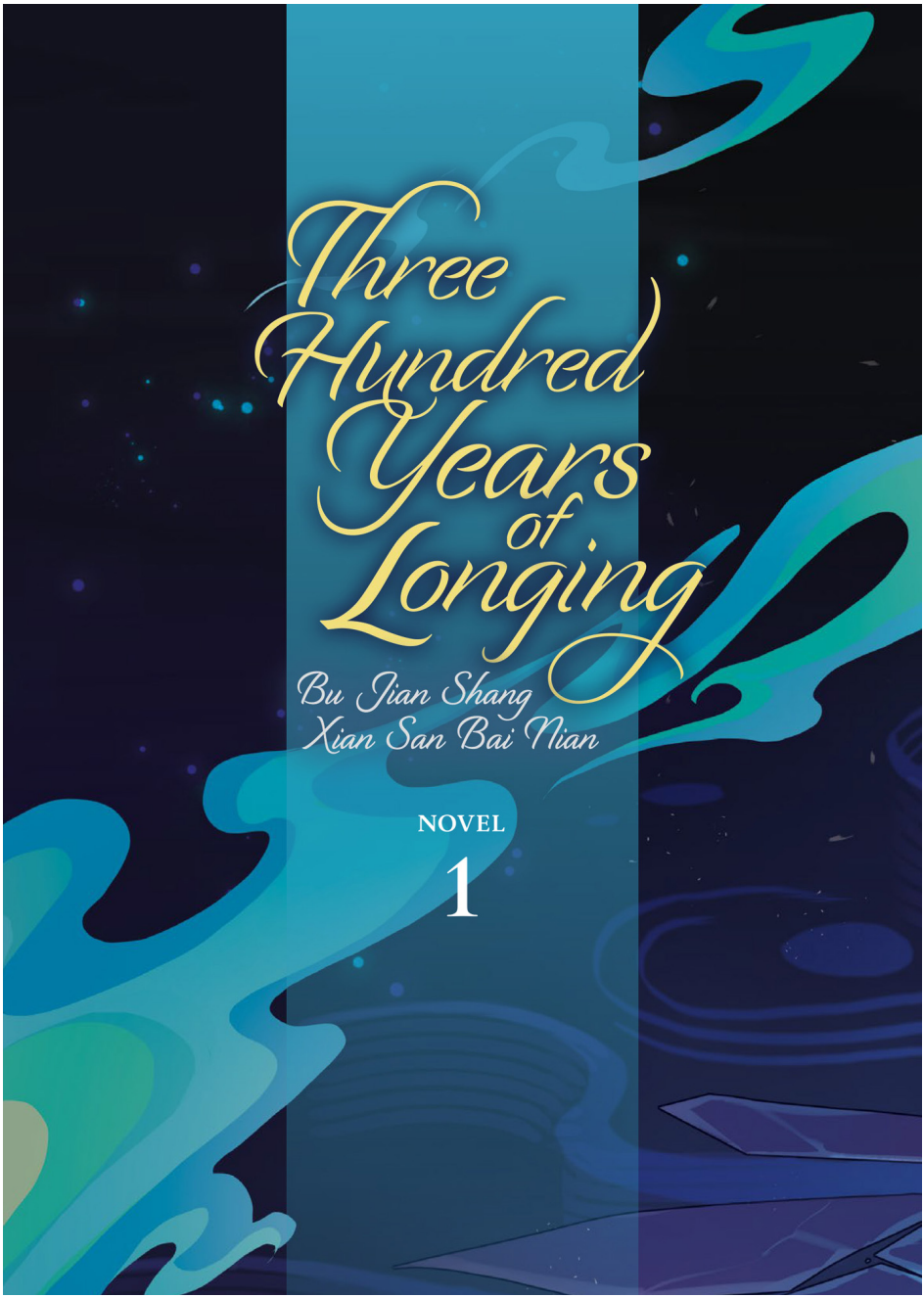
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NOVEL
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Seven Seas Entertainment

Three Hundred Years of Longing: Bu Jian Shang Xian San Bai Nian (Novel) Vol. 1

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Chapter 1:
Archfiend

DURING THE CATACLYSM ERA, snow blanketed Mian Province. Three thousand miles of the Boundless Sea were sealed by ice and snow all the way to the Northern Domain of Tealspire.

It was too cold here, with thin ice floating on stagnant water. Wu Xingxue stood on the withered tree in the middle of the pool, washing blood off of his hands.

His hands were slender and pale, untainted by the burdens of life, as if they'd only ever played with a jade pavilion's birds or admired the flowers in Urbs Caelestia. Despite that, not too long ago, two of his fingers had torn off quite a few heads. Thus, he was thorough in washing them, showing no sign that he was about to speak.

No one waiting by the shore dared speak either. After holding their breaths for ages, they finally heard a single sentence.

"What year is this?" Wu Xingxue asked. His voice traveled through the mist over a vast body of water, so it was hard to hear.

"Um, it's the twenty-fifth year of Cataclysm," one of the listeners on the shore answered a moment later.

Wu Xingxue sniffed his now-washed fingers before turning his gaze toward them. "Cataclysm?"

"That's right, Cataclysm."

"Cataclysm…" Wu Xingxue quietly repeated the unfamiliar era name.

"The coalition of cultivation clans had it changed," the one who'd answered earlier hurriedly added.

"Oh." Wu Xingxue dropped his hands. There was the faintest metallic clinking as he moved, as though he was bound in chains.

Those by the shore reacted strongly to the sound, and a tingle of shock raced along their scalps. They peered toward the man in the center of the pond.

Wu Xingxue was dressed in a plain sea-blue robe, his figure almost

melding into the cold fog. Whether it was the wrist exposed by his sleeves or the ankles above his bare feet, his skin was pale and clean without the slightest hint of chains. Nevertheless, the clinking was very real.

Someone murmured, "What sound is—"

"Shh! Have you gone nuts? You think you're the only one who's grown a mouth? What'd you say that to his face for? If you want to die, fine, but don't drag the rest of us with you!"

Lest the man in the water hear him, the voice doing the interrupting only dared to whisper, even as he berated his peer. Unfortunately, he was heard anyway.

"What sound is what?" Wu Xingxue asked. "Don't stop. Keep talking."

Everyone by the shore stopped breathing for a second and swallowed, their fingers quivering at their sides. "No, no! W-we didn't say anything. Not a thing."

The notorious Northern Domain of Tealspire was even more terrifying than a den of fiends. Specters and fiends feared not karmic retribution or the gods, yet they were absolutely terrified of this place. All the abominations imprisoned here were clapped in heavenly chains, both invisible and unbreakable, that censured the wicked on heaven's behalf. It might take as little as a day or as long as a year, but the fiends thus fettered would inevitably break under this torment, their souls torn asunder, until their spiritual cores and flesh were both annihilated.

This domain had hung above the Boundless Sea for five hundred and thirteen years, and no one had ever survived to tell the tale—aside from the archfiend Wu Xingxue. So far, he had somehow survived being chained here for twenty-five years.

Who would dare to actually answer an archfiend draped in invisible chains and softly asking, "*Do* tell me, what sound could you mean?"

Dead silence permeated the cold fog. Those by the shore glanced over and found Wu Xingxue staring at them wordlessly with his head tilted to one side. Full-body chills ran through them all.

Oh no, our unpredictable master is at it again, they thought as one.

Now, this world-renowned archfiend didn't *look* threatening. On

the contrary, he appeared dignified, even noble, and he had a pleasant voice and a pretty face to boot—especially his eyes. The corners of his eyes dipped ever so slightly downward. When gazed at from above, they seemed to dissolve like drops of black ink into a cold pool.

But what did looks mean? On top of the fiendish underlings he had eliminated, he had killed the Twelve Immortals of the Spirit Terrace without a second thought! Who wouldn't have been threatened?

He spoke. Terrifying. He did not speak. Still terrifying. If he tilted his head just so, he was even more nightmarish! His audience was drenched in cold sweat just looking at him.

Soon, unable to endure the silent treatment, the first to misspeak quivered and said, "A-Archon, I'm sorry. I was wrong and rambled on without thinking. I shouldn't have brought up the ch—I mean, I didn't! I really am, uh, really so…"

The speaker stopped, spat, then swiped a line of blood that had dripped from the side of his mouth. He shaped his mouth around a vicious curse and a violent oath, but Wu Xingxue cut him off.

"What were you wrong about? I don't understand."

No one answered him.

"Also, did you call me 'Archon'?"

Not that either.

Shit. What did the word "Archon" ever do to you? We can't call you that either? they wondered.

Facing these strange questions, those by the shore were about to lose it. What they didn't know was that the one on the tree had lost it long ago.

On the surface, Wu Xingxue was as calm as a windless day at sea, but a typhoon in his heart was making huge waves. Only four words swirled in his thoughts: *How can this be?!*

All he'd done was take a nap, so how had he ended up possessing someone?

A moment ago, he was a noble in the city of Magpie Haven. He'd set down his ambrosial brew at the Banquet of Winding Wine, put on his overcoat, and made his way home.

Snow had fallen in Magpie Haven for two days straight and

showed no sign of stopping, making the walk difficult. He was tall, so his servant boy had a hard time trying to hold an umbrella over him. As he went, it swayed left and right. Eventually, he couldn't stand to watch anymore and took the umbrella to hold himself. He handed over the jade hand-warming stove from his sleeve, making the serving boy feel overwhelmed by his master's kindness all the way home.

The servants at his estate had already prepared his bed by placing warming flasks beneath the covers. It was so toasty that he started feeling drowsy as soon as he walked through the door.

He remembered pulling a random novel off the shelf and, half lying on the bed, starting to read. Outside the window, a winter sparrow landed on the flower-guarding bells, making them chime. As he listened and read, he nodded off with his head in his hand…

When Wu Xingxue had woken to a cacophony of conversation and opened his eyes, he'd found himself in this dump—surrounded on all sides by water, shrouded in a fog that stretched on forever. A single dead tree stood alone in the middle of the pool, and dim shadows of short pale branches swam beneath the water. At first, he thought they were the white coral that had once been all the rage in Magpie Haven, but on closer examination, they turned out to be human arms.

It's seriously full of human arms…

He was standing alone, barefoot, on a dead tree's branch that might break at any moment, no support beneath him, surrounded by corpse arms. The wind was blowing *at* him. The branch was shaking. And his hands were covered in blood!

Heaven only knew how much he wanted to cuss someone out in that instant.

The protagonists of epic poems and novels were always having "sudden dreams of youth" when they closed their eyes. Why, when it was his turn, had he ended up with visions of "demonic possession"?!

Wait, that wasn't quite right: *He* had possessed a demon.

Thanks to the blabbermouths by the shore, he'd clarified some of the most crucial points before he spoke and gave himself away. This dump was known as the Northern Domain of Tealspire, a place used exclusively for archfiend imprisonment, and he just so happened to be the imprisoned archfiend. The people by the shore seemed to be his underlings. When one of them barged in earlier, he'd been dragging a

mangled body behind him before he kicked it into the water, no expression on his face. Clearly, they were not kindhearted individuals.

Surrounded by such people, did he dare to say "I'm not the owner of this body"? If he did, the underlings shaking with trepidation were liable to change their tune on the spot and rip him in two, then toss *his* remains into this pool of stagnant water. He had no choice but to keep them talking while he washed the blood from his hands.

However, after much ado, all he'd managed to get out of them was a whole lot of spitting, "Archon, I was wrong," and "Archon, I'll shut my mouth."

Blast it all.

Wu Xingxue was considering his next move when a din erupted. It was hard to identify it through the thick, ironlike cliff face, but it sounded like the clamor of countless fighters circling the area with weapons drawn. Voices were interspersed in the noise, and he could vaguely make out murmurs of "What are we waiting for?" and "That archfiend."

Before the voices faded, he felt a strong tremor. Fragmented star metal and black stones fell from above, and the cold, dark, and boundless pool shook as if caught in a violent earthquake, jolting Wu Xingxue enough to force him to grab hold of the nearest tree branch—which then snapped.

Oops.

The underlings by the shore were also listening to the commotion beyond the cliff walls, brows furrowed.

"Doesn't sound good."

"Reckon the whole coalition of cultivation clans is here."

"Well, 'course they'd have to come. Haven't they always acted like their lives depended on Tealspire?"

"Yeah, don't they say it's the last place on earth that can intimidate fiends and filth? How else could they act?"

"Ha, so what? This place is done for anyway."

Boom!

Another rumble. The cliffs around them were as solid as iron, but the tremor was becoming more and more pronounced.

“No way, if they keep this up they’re going to be in here before long! Archon, we—”

The underlings turned back to him and broke off mid-sentence. Seeing Wu Xingxue with downcast eyes, his fingers wrapped around a freshly broken dead branch, they became puzzled.

“‘We’ what? Go on,” Wu Xingxue said. He seemed to have only broken the branch off to fiddle with it. After looking at it a couple of times, he lost interest and tossed it into the pool.

The underlings stared warily at the dead branch floating in the water. They knew anything that passed through the archfiend’s hands, even just a drop of water, was worthy of fear.

One underling licked his parched lips, unable to look away from the dead branch. “We… We must hurry and leave this place.”

“Right, Archon,” another underling said. “Tealspire’s had all sorts of strange goings-on over the past couple of days, and everyone’s saying the end is nigh. The clans are worried this place will collapse, so they couldn’t stay put. Every last one of them has rushed here.”

What the underlings didn’t add was that half had come to try their best to save it, and the other half had come because they feared that the archfiend locked up inside wasn’t dead enough. Under these circumstances, if the two sides were to clash, it would lead to a tremendous battle. Just the thought of it gave every underling a headache.

“So, you’re frightened and in a hurry because you can’t beat them in a fight?” Wu Xingxue asked before any of them could continue.

The underlings fell silent. They certainly couldn’t *nod*.

“Archon, the clan disciples outside aren’t even worth mentioning,” said the eldest one.

The person beside him was silent for two seconds, then turned to stare at him questioningly.

“See, there’s Tealspire itself,” the eldest underling continued. He took a quick look around. “Strange things have been seen, and there’s whispers it’s because this place’s vital energy has run out. They’re probably right, otherwise we couldn’t have gotten in here to begin with. But, you know, this place used to be guarded by that…Tianxiu Immortal.”

Although he mumbled his last words very quickly, the person at his side elbowed him under his breath. “He perished alongside Urbs Caelestia! Must you bring him up in front of the archon?!”

Since the shore was so far away, they risked sneaking a glance at Wu Xingxue, who remained silent.

There it is again, Wu Xingxue thought. *All the blood has drained from their faces, but they’re giving each other looks as if they’re all in agreement about something. Is there some gossip about the Tianxiu Immortal and me—I mean, the original owner of this body? Why are they glancing at me like that?!*

Wu Xingxue desperately wanted to demand the underling continue so he could learn the whole story. Due to his identity, however, he had no choice but to let it go. Not being the rightful owner of this imprisoned body, he didn’t know how else to react to hearing the unfamiliar title. He remained silent and indifferent in self-defense.

“A-at any rate,” the eldest underling stuttered, “even though that one is long gone, there might be a trap he left behind in this awful place. It’d mean trouble for us if we got caught in it.”

“Well, that’s true,” Wu Xingxue said.

“*Please*, Archon, let’s just go!”

They sounded almost like grandmothers, anxious and earnest, as they nagged him. Their archon thought their pleas rather reasonable, something he should acquiesce to with a nod, but he also had a rather more pressing problem: Without tarnishing the reputation of a certain archfiend, could someone please tell him how was he supposed to get off this tree?

Wu Xingxue glanced at the unfathomable pool beneath his feet, then turned his attention to the shore. His subordinates stared at him, waiting for a command. He thought for a moment and raised a hand. He traced his slightly hooked index finger across the silhouettes on the shore until he stopped to point at a relatively pleasant-looking one.

“You, come over here.” His voice remained neutral.

The chosen one shivered and froze on the spot, confused. “Me?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Archon, d-did I say something wrong? I didn’t even speak up earlier!”

Wu Xingxue paused. *Wuss,* he thought scornfully.

"Come over here," he said again, dropping his hand. As he moved, the invisible chains jangled and rattled again.

"Yes, Archon," the chosen one said, not daring to ask any more questions.

Bracing himself, he put one foot on the stagnant water and crossed a great distance in a single leap. He reached the dead tree in the blink of an eye, but right as he was about to land, an earsplitting boom rang out. Invisible sword auras flew in from every direction, bearing the chill that froze Tealspire for three thousand miles around. The arm the underling had extended toward Wu Xingxue exploded into a bloody mist as the rest of him was tossed back to shore.

In a flash, the giant arcane formation in the cold pool erupted in waves that reached into the sky. Wu Xingxue sensed the piercing cold intent of blades barreling at him and squeezed his eyes shut.

By the time he opened them again, a golden Victoria water lily, large enough to contain the entire Northern Domain of Tealspire, was bursting into bloom beneath his feet.

Amid blinding snow and afterimages of gold swords, he saw an ethereal figure standing before him.

The man was tall, and his hands rested on the hilt of a greatsword. Three black, square mourning studs pierced the cartilage of his right ear, and though their sharp points radiated an aura of menace, his face was as refined as crown jade. The scent of cold iron hung around him like high-altitude winds above the Boundless Sea.

In the tumult of heavenly winds, he turned to Wu Xingxue. A golden mark was faintly discernible on the nape of his neck, just beneath his ear: the word *Mian*. It was common knowledge that Mian was the courtesy name bestowed on the Tianxiu Immortal, Xiao Fuxuan —Mian, for absolution, the pardoning of all sins.

Chapter 2:
Sarcophagus

OUTSIDE TEALSPIRE, the clan disciples were caught flat-footed by the blooming water lily's explosion. An invisible aura of crushing dominance rushed forth like a tsunami, pushing everyone back more than a thousand feet. The swords and magical weapons of those nearest the impact shattered and crumbled, destroyed on the spot.

"Matriarch," a disciple coughed out as he struggled out of the snow. He held his chest and tried to push himself back up with his sword, only to find that its hilt was all that remained. "Matriarch, my sword…"

To some clan disciples, especially those of a major sword cultivation clan like the Feng clan, one's sword was more valuable than one's life—and this young man just so happened to be a disciple of that clan. Still, Feng Juyan didn't even look at him. Her eyes remained glued to a spot hundreds of feet away. A furrow deepened between her delicate eyebrows.

"Toss it. We'll forge you a new one when we get back."

As the leader of a clan, she had not ended up rolling on the ground like an initiate. She held her ground by drawing her longsword before her body, blocking most of the domineering aura. Though she stood ramrod straight, blood seeped from between her fingers, drawing lines in the inlaid pattern of her sword.

The initiate felt a jolt of fear at the sight of the matriarch's blood. A recent initiate into the clan, he knew very little, and this was the first time he'd seen their leader bleed.

"Matriarch, what is that golden light? How could it be so powerful?"

"I suspect it was Fate's Victoria," Feng Juyan replied in a hushed voice.

"Fate's Victoria?"

The initiates looked both alarmed and unconvinced. According to legend, Fate's Victoria was a move exclusive to the Tianxiu Immortal.

Since he was in charge of penance, one hand meting out death while the other gave life, he had two vital moves: one to bring death to all it touched, and another to give life where there was none. Fate's Victoria would be the former.

"We've only heard about it, never witnessed it firsthand."

"Who could have witnessed it? Anyone who has is dead," said Feng Juyan.

Besides, it was a vital move. Its user had to trade their vitality to power the move, burning their spiritual core as fuel. Even for the Tianxiu Immortal, it levied an immense toll. It wasn't something he would use under ordinary circumstances.

The last time it had blossomed had been twenty-five years earlier. On that day, Mount Taiyin crumbled, and the nearby Urbs Caelestia was utterly destroyed. Three thousand spirit terraces came crashing down. Most fell to the bottom of the Boundless Sea. Some said the golden shadow of a Victoria water lily shone from above the peak of Mount Taiyin. Thereafter, the archfiend Wu Xingxue was chained into the Northern Domain of Tealspire, and Urbs Caelestia was no more.

With its demise, the mortal world naturally fell into chaos, and disaster abounded. Only those corners of the world where cultivation clans congregated or shrines and idols stood in large numbers maintained a fragile peace. From that day on, the cultivation clans referred to the era as "Cataclysm."

"Matriarch, why has the Fate's Victoria manifested again? Hasn't the Tianxiu Immortal already…perished?" the initiate asked.

"Well, he was once in charge of Tealspire, so fragments of his spirit probably linger there. As for why Fate's Victoria suddenly manifested, could it be—" Feng Juyan cut herself off suddenly.

Could it be that the archfiend really is still alive? Not just alive but also trying to leave this place? Is that why it was forced to take such final, desperate measures?

"But it's already been twenty-five years," Feng Juyan said. "He's been imprisoned under heavenly fetters for all that time. Even if the archfiend was still alive, I thought he would be taking his last breaths, knocking on death's door!"

Who wouldn't have? Nearly the entire coalition had assumed the

same. They'd never expected a tough fight, which was why they had mostly brought younger disciples and left the rest at home to guard against the troublemaking fiends from Nightgleam. Now, it seemed that might have been a rash decision.

"In my opinion, we must send for reinforcements," someone suggested.

"D-doesn't that seem like we're overreacting a bit?"

"Not at all. This is Wu Xingxue, who once bathed Urbs Caelestia in blood."

As the coalition discussed matters of great importance, Wu Xingxue (the guy who once bathed Urbs Caelestia in blood) was busy getting lost.

The man leaning on his greatsword had appeared briefly only to be gone in an instant. When he vanished, the giant golden Victoria water lily wrapped itself around Wu Xingxue and yanked him down.

At the time, he thought, *Oh no, I'm going to be found out.* Falling disgracefully into the drink under all these watchful eyes would spell the end of his fiend act.

Wu Xingxue had just finished laughing at himself when he heard one of his underlings utter an even more disgraceful cry of fear.

Wu Xingxue was puzzled as the plunge he expected never came. The cold pool beneath him seemed illusory—not a single drop of water clung to him, yet he continued to fall at high speed. Frigid air whistled past, and his underlings' dismayed cries never stopped.

"What fresh hellhole is this?" he faintly heard someone say.

"There are thirty-three floors down to the bottom of Tealspire," an even less distinct voice said. "It corresponds to the number of ascending floors in the White Pagoda of Mount Taiyin."

"Something's hidden in the lowest level," another added.

When Wu Xingxue landed, he felt a brutal pull on his bones in every place the chains had been nailed into him. Intense pain hit his chest, hip bones, wrists, and ankles, obliterating his five senses. He couldn't tell how he'd landed or how much of a mess he appeared. Fortunately, as he regained his senses, he could feel that he was

upright. The golden Victoria water lily that had wrapped itself around him must have disappeared; he could no longer taste the snow-tinged sword aura in the air.

As he waited for the agony to pass, he thought about how strange this all was. Who among the nobles of Magpie Haven hadn't been raised in silk and ermine? They were a delicate bunch, and he was no different, accustomed to an easy life. Whenever he incurred the smallest injury, the entire estate would work itself into a frenzy coaxing him to use poultices and helping him apply healing ointment. Despite that, he'd managed to remain silent while he suffered like his heart were being ripped out, just because some underlings were present.

In a past life, I must have owed a lot to them, thought Wu Xingxue.

Thus, when the underlings landed every which way a moment later, what they saw was their archon slowly opening his eyes to sweep his gaze over them before letting out a grim laugh. They stayed quiet. They were about to ask where they'd been dragged to this time, but hearing that laugh, they gulped the question right back into their stomachs.

Still, in the end, the quick-mouthed one couldn't hold it in. "Archon, what're you laughing about?" he asked cautiously.

He'd been practicing the art of poison-sealing since he was fourteen and hadn't grown an inch since. Among his companions, he appeared small and thin. That had been one thing when there was some distance between him and the archon, but now that they were only three steps apart, Wu Xingxue looked extremely tall by comparison. The underling had to gaze upward just to talk. He waited for a moment, his hopeful face upturned.

Wu Xingxue raised a hand and brushed his slender fingers against his wrist, hooking one into something invisible. "Me? I'm laughing at how annoying this chain is. Clink-clink-clank-clank. So noisy!"

The underling fell silent. *I really know what to say, huh?* He dared not turn his face away, though he was quite done with this mouth of his.

Wu Xingxue dropped his hand from the chain and tossed the group a command. "Lead the way."

"Let's go, let's go, let's go. Hurry it up!" another underling hastily responded. Perhaps fearing the fast-talker's mouth was going to get him

killed, he grabbed the chatty guy and yanked him forward, spitting through gritted teeth, “Be an idiot all you want, Ning Huaishan, but don’t make the rest of us into a pile of bodies for you to land on!”

Ning Huaishan was dragged a few steps until he blinked and stopped. “Wait, no, where’re we going?”

Everyone came to a sudden halt. *Oh yeah, where* are *we going?*

They were all a bit lost, and after a moment’s hesitation, they asked as a group, “Archon, where’re we leading you?”

Wu Xingxue stayed a moderate distance behind them, but he did not stop walking. “You tell me.”

Uh, we…

They remained silent and didn’t dare press for more details. They knew best that Wu Xingxue hated stupidity more than anything. The group scanned their surroundings: a barren wasteland covered in a layer of snow, ash gray as far as the eye could see. A towering dead tree stood in the distance. Covered in black scorch marks, it looked to have been burned at some point. They could not see its top no matter how far back they craned their necks. They suspected that the withered branches on which Wu Xingxue had stood earlier were its crown.

Ning Huaishan elbowed his companion inconspicuously. “Have you heard? There are thirty-three levels to Tealspire.”

The Northern Domain of Tealspire hung above the Boundless Sea like a massive black spire, shrouded in storm clouds year-round. According to legend, it had thirty-three levels representing the thirty-three heavens, just like the glazed pagoda on Mount Taiyin before it collapsed. If the branches on which Wu Xingxue had stood were the highest level, then this barren wasteland where the towering tree grew must have been the lowest.

“Where’d you hear a rumor like that? Even if there are thirty-three floors, that’s useless information. Did the rumors also tell you where the archon wants us to lead him?”

Ning Huaishan paused.

“Nope!” He combed his memories for anything helpful. “The rumors did say there’s treasure hidden in the bottommost floor. When the archon asked us to lead the way, could that have been what he meant?”

“Think for a second and listen to what you just said. How are we supposed to know where the treasure is, and how are we supposed to lead the way? It’d be weird if that’s what the archon meant.”

“Tsk, shut your trap. Let’s look first, and if by some rare chance we manage to find it, then at least it won’t count as having led him the wrong way.”

The towering dead tree really was eye-catching, and since there was no other place in this wasteland for a treasure to hide, their first move was toward it. Only when they got a little closer did they discover the countless swords half buried at an angle in the ground at the foot of the tree. It looked like an infinite cemetery of sword graves.

Wu Xingxue trailed behind them through the sword graves until he felt his legs were about to snap, and still it seemed they weren’t even half a step closer to the tree. As he stared at their backs, he sighed inside.

Is it too late to rattle these chains and threaten these people into sitting down for a bit?

Perhaps feeling the daggers stared into his back, Ning Huaishan turned. “Um, Archon? These sword graves might be an arcane formation…”

Wu Xingxue showed no hint of surprise. “So what?”

“You know we’re no good at breaking formations.” Ning Huaishan shot a quick glance at Wu Xingxue. “Stuff like formations was always your…”

“My *what*? Say it.” Wu Xingxue said after a second. He softened his tone and brought no emotion to his words. His grasp of how best to sound frightening was just right, and he thought he might get past this ordeal—

“Archon, please stop using us for your amusement,” another underling said, scrunching up his face. “I know it must be ’cause we upset you, and you can do whatever you want to punish us later. But we’re really not good at handling this sort of thing.”

“Yeah, and besides, this is Tealspire we’re talking about. If we bumble around and mess things up, that’d be really bad.”

“Right, Archon! You can break a formation like this in three steps, so why waste your energy following us around?”

Ugh. Looks like this is one ordeal I cannot dodge. He stared at his underlings. *Never mind three steps, I might still be here in three years. Does that scare you or what?*

He took a deep, quiet breath. Just as he was about to think of something, he spied a stripe of white in his peripheral vision.

It was a white distinct from snow, warm and luminous like the jade upon the high steps of a bright hall. He turned to look, and through the gaps of the crisscrossing cold swords, he saw a corner of what appeared to be a platform made of white jade. Wu Xingxue stopped paying attention to his underlings and began to walk toward it.

Sidestepping the swords with his bare feet, he soon stood before the jade platform. Only then did he discover that it was no such thing. It was actually a giant white-jade sarcophagus lying beneath that towering, lifeless tree, surrounded by a million cold swords. Its four edges were held down with studs, each bearing a single word carved in its head—a word that, not too long ago, Wu Xingxue had seen stamped on the nape of a man's neck.

This is…

"Xiao Fuxuan's sarcophagus!"

Chapter 3:
Puppet

XIAO FUXUAN'S SARCOPHAGUS? Xiao Fuxuan…

Wu Xingxue softly repeated the name. In the meantime, his underlings approached but were unwilling to get too close.

"Well, that's odd." Ning Huaishan craned his neck, sounding puzzled. "What's the Tianxiu Immortal's sarcophagus doing here?"

Good boy. He can keep talking, Wu Xingxue thought.

He'd been pondering who this Xiao Fuxuan was lest he get it wrong and reveal his lack of knowledge. Luckily, Ning Huaishan was chatty enough to prevent Wu Xingxue from betraying his ignorance. Still, it *was* really strange. He didn't know how things worked in this world, but he'd read novels before. The gods in novels always thought of fiends as filth, the two sides as incompatible as water and fire and just as irreconcilable. Who would put their own sarcophagus in a prison that exclusively jailed archfiends? Was he that worried about resting in peace?

Perhaps there's another explanation, Wu Xingxue thought, reaching out to run his hand over one edge of the studded sarcophagus.

He'd had this bad habit since he was a child. Most princes and dukes of Magpie Haven loved curiosities like Buddhist relics, Naga Pearls, Lamps of the Illuminated, and so on, each name more ostentatiously chosen than the last. But not him. He was rather old-fashioned and fond only of white jade. Whenever he saw it, he couldn't stop himself from touching it to assess its quality.

"If you're asking me, it can't be his real body in there, that's for sure," an underling said. "Probably a cenotaph with just his clothes in it."

"A cenotaph would still be weird," another underling said. "That's no different from him lying in it himself."

"Sure, if you can carve some ugly stone statue in a shabby mountain shrine and call it god-touched, if you dress it in the clothes he's worn, why, you can't even call the thing god-touched anymore.

That's just the god himself, right? Archon, you—"

Ning Huaishan turned to see his very own archon running his hands over the sarcophagus, and his sarcasm fell away as he stared. The tableau before him was unbelievable.

That's way too bizarre.

The other underlings were also stunned. The archfiend's mood was as unpredictable as the weather, and indeed he always defied expectations. He did not necessarily smile from joy nor speak in a soft, gentle tone for the sake of giving praise. Serving him was difficult, and trying to understand him was even harder. But that was *Xiao Fuxuan's* sarcophagus—the same man who chained him to Tealspire. Why was he touching it?

Ning Huaishan licked his lips. "Archon, what are you doing?"

The subordinates exchanged glances and turned to Wu Xingxue again. The one nearest Ning Huaishan twisted his neck in an odd way. He pressed one finger onto Ning Huaishan's hand resting at his side and began to write: *Don't you get the feeling that…*

Before he could finish, they heard a thump. A black stud over a foot in length leaped from the spot Wu Xingxue's fingers had just caressed. Fragments of jade still clung to it, swirling with faint, golden light. It looked as if it had been jerked out with brute force.

The underlings looked on in silence. The one writing with his fingers withdrew his hand. Soon, there was a second thump.

Bam!

Out came another black stud. Then there was a third. And a fourth.

No one uttered a word. Every time it lost a stud, the entire sarcophagus shuddered. It wasn't just the sarcophagus—the sword graves, the huge tree, and the whole wasteland around them trembled with it.

As though confronted with a formidable foe, Ning Huaishan and the others retreated several hundred feet.

"Archon!" the group exclaimed. "We thought you… So, you were trying to *open* the sarcophagus?!"

No, I was not, Wu Xingxue thought. *If I knew any magic, I'd have*

run away faster than any of you.

Alas, he knew none. Not only was he unable to run, his legs were practically immobile. He had no idea what powers this sarcophagus possessed, but as it shook, he felt as though countless invisible hands had grown from the ground to hold him fast. Despite his underlings' retreat, he was stuck beside the sarcophagus, unable to do a thing as he watched the studs fall.

After the last thump sounded, there was a screech of grinding stone. The giant white-jade lid slid off and fell to the floor with a resounding crash. Wu Xingxue closed his eyes. He did not smell the fetor of decay; the only scents lingering before his nose were of snow and dust—a little like Magpie Haven in deep winter.

"It really is open…" Ning Huaishan and the others murmured. "Archon, what's in it?"

Wu Xingxue opened his eyes. The sides of the white-jade sarcophagus were much higher than a regular sarcophagus. He could not see inside from where he stood. The force grabbing his feet had vanished at some point, so he took a hesitant step forward. "It is…"

Xiao Fuxuan.

Wu Xingxue's lips parted, then he subconsciously pursed them again. This was unexpected. The Tianxiu Immortal really was lying inside. He looked identical to the phantom atop the golden Victoria water lily, though there was something different about him too.

A layer of dense, cold air clung to the inside walls of the sarcophagus, and Xiao Fuxuan was lying within this chill. Frost covered his closed eyes and the black studs in his ear. He looked completely lifeless and even colder than the sarcophagus's jade walls. Wu Xingxue stood with his hand on the edge of the sarcophagus for a long time, his gaze lowered.

Ning Huaishan's voice gradually grew closer. "Archon, are his clothes in there? Or have some personal items been left inside to protect the place?"

Having waited and waited without receiving an answer, the underlings approached like timid mice and stood around the sarcophagus. As soon as they peeked in, they saw Xiao Fuxuan's face. There was a moment of silence—then Ning Huaishan skedaddled back to his starting position.

The others made to follow suit, but then one of them said, “Hold on, that’s not right. Wait!”

“What, am I nuts? Why would I wait?” asked Ning Huaishan.

“The Archon’s here, you know. What’re you panicking for? Look again. The body inside the coffin isn’t the real thing.”

Huh? Not the real thing? Wu Xingxue raised his eyes, then dropped them again, worried he might look too surprised.

Thankfully, Ning Huaishan had a mouth on him. “It’s not the real thing?”

“What, did you forget? Immortals just love to split themselves up into multiple physical forms. They can just leave one here and one there.”

Oh yeah, thought Wu Xingxue. *They do like writing that in novels. That’s how gods travel through the mortal realm.*

“How can you even tell?” Ning Huaishan replied skeptically.

“I’m older, you know? I’ve seen stuff like this before. Look at his left wrist.”

Wu Xingxue looked. The body in the sarcophagus had a tiny black mark inside its left wrist. It looked like the Victoria water lily Wu Xingxue had seen earlier.

So, it isn’t the real thing, just an empty shell?

Though the underlings were still talking, Wu Xingxue was no longer listening closely. He wanted to figure something out: If the body lying in this jade sarcophagus wasn’t the real thing and wasn’t about to reanimate itself, then who had opened the sarcophagus?

He glanced down at his own hand. For a moment, he suspected that the so-called archfiend, the rightful owner of this body, hadn’t disappeared entirely. Perhaps he’d even left some residual power in these hands.

But that didn’t seem right. When he’d touched the sarcophagus, he hadn’t put any force behind it. He was really just touching. Besides, hearing what the owner of this body was capable of, wouldn’t it have been the easiest thing in the world for him to take it back if he were still here? Why would this fiend let him stay?

These possibilities were running through Wu Xingxue’s head when

he spotted something under the fake Xiao Fuxuan's palm. It was wrapped loosely in his fingers so that only a corner of it was showing.

Is it a jade carving? Wu Xingxue hesitated. *Even if you're just a shell, I should let you know in advance anyway, so…please excuse me.*

He pushed aside those icy fingers and retrieved the object beneath the palm. It was a statue of a person carved from white jade. Its craftsmanship was expressive and lifelike, but the figure lacked a face, making it impossible to discern who was depicted. There was a sword in its hands, however, and flowers carved into the square platform beneath its feet.

In Magpie Haven, only one kind of stone or jade carving had a square base—an idol of a deity used for worship and offerings. He wondered if it was the same here. If it *were* an idol, then considering it was holding a sword as well, it probably depicted the Tianxiu Immortal himself.

Wu Xingxue speculated while his fingers stroked the flowing carved lines on the square base. As his thumb brushed over a particular spot, his heart skipped a beat. He suddenly heard a voice.

Have you been to the city of Spring Pennant on the west side of Reverie? A savant named Yi Wusheng resides there.

Wu Xingxue kept silent, but he almost threw the idol away. Luckily, he'd seen a lot in Magpie Haven, and the one thing he was good at was maintaining a deadpan expression.

Who's talking? Why was I able to hear that voice? Wu Xingxue's eyes were lowered, but undercurrents churned in his heart. *Is it because I'm holding this idol?*

He waited in silence before running his thumb over the same carved flower he'd touched before. This time, nothing happened.

What's going on? Are you saying that this case of possession comes with a case of hallucinations as well? Wu Xingxue examined the idol again from top to bottom, musing the whole time.

Without warning, the voice spoke again. *Do you want to go back? Seek him out.*

Wu Xingxue's fingers tightened. The content was still incoherent, but the words "Do you want to go back?" basically read his mind.

Did he want to go back? Of course he did! He wanted to return to

Magpie Haven more than anything. There were no fiends or cultivators of the infernal path, no places like the Northern Domain of Tealspire, and no clinking, noisy heavenly fetters. In Magpie Haven, there was no distinguishing between a capital of the gods or a den of fiends—there was merely a mortal realm with crowded streets where people could come and go as they pleased.

City of Spring Pennant… Yi Wusheng… He repeated those two names, then laughed to himself. *You must be delusional. You have no idea whose voice this is nor whom these words are for. It's highly likely that this is nothing more than residual spiritual consciousness left on an idol that coincidentally aligned with your thoughts. I can't believe you took it seriously.*

Shaking his head gently, he was about to return the deluding idol when the indistinct voice spoke again.

These kinds of shells are the most useful. All you have to do is pinch the center of the wrist, pour your spiritual consciousness into it, and you've made yourself a puppet. If it's the shell of someone notable, then it's quite a score. When you take it out with you, it's both obedient and impressive. Are you obedient?

Wu Xingxue kept his mouth shut. Without further ado, he tossed the idol back into the sarcophagus. Because he was actually respectful of the Tianxiu Immortal, he missed him on purpose. The idol fell with a thunk to the bottom of the jade sarcophagus, startling Ning Huaishan and the others so much they jumped.

"Archon, you can't just toss that id—Archon?" Ning Huaishan had only managed to get half a sentence out when he saw Wu Xingxue grab hold of the side of the sarcophagus and bend down to reach the person inside. He took hold of Xiao Fuxuan's wrist and rubbed his slender thumb over that black mark.

Isn't that how you make a puppet?! The underlings were aghast.

"Y-you're not thinking about making the Tianxiu Immortal's mortal shell into your puppet, are you, Archon?"

Of course not, Wu Xingxue thought. *Do I dare? And do I even know how?*

Truth was, he wasn't sure why he'd touched the mark either. Was it to prove that the voice in his head wasn't imagined? But he couldn't actually prove anything. The voice said that he had to pour in his

spiritual consciousness. He had nothing to pour and could do nothing but rub, so how was he going to get anything out of this?

Before the thought faded, something jumped beneath his thumb. It was very faint, like a living person's pulse.

Hmm?

Huh.

Wait, what?

Wait a minute…

With a great start, he lifted his gaze and saw the body inside the sarcophagus—the one who had been dead for gods only knew how long—open his eyes.

The shrieks of Ning Huaishan and the other underlings were loud enough to shake the sky. "You did it! You actually did it! Archon, take a look, you've made a puppet! He opened his eyes!"

Meanwhile, their archon's heart had gone cold from shock. *He has opened his eyes, yes. The scariest part is that I haven't done anything, but he really did open his eyes.*

Before Wu Xingxue had a chance to plead his innocence, a mighty force struck his body. The world blurred and spun around him. Instinctively, he closed his eyes.

No one saw how the so-called puppet rose from the sarcophagus; all they felt was a sudden typhoon emerging from the wasteland, swirling the snow around them into a vortex in front of the jade vault. Every longsword in the graveyard trembled, and the sound of metal on metal blended into the wind, nearly indistinguishable from the rattle of Wu Xingxue's chains. When the snow dispersed, the puppet was pinning Wu Xingxue to the ground. Its right hand caught a longsword that flew from the graveyard. With a dazzling spin of the blade, it pointed the cold tip downward.

A moment passed in silence.

Wu Xingxue heard the whistle of a sword flying through the air, and his eyes snapped open. The tip of the sword had buried itself in the ground mere inches away. A frigid, piercing aura swept toward him with the wind, stopping just short of his neck. Though the blade was perilously close, not a hair on his head had been harmed.

Xiao Fuxuan blinked away the frost clinging to his eyelashes before looking down at him. After a long pause, Xiao Fuxuan called his name.

“Wu Xingxue.”

Chapter 4:
Freed

WU XINGXUE NARROWED his eyes for a split second. He was accustomed to a life free of worry; this was the first time he'd ever felt a blade against his throat.

"Are you going to kill me?" he whispered, looking at Xiao Fuxuan.

Xiao Fuxuan's lips parted, but he did not answer.

"You mustn't kill me."

Xiao Fuxuan's hand was still on his sword, his gaze falling past the straight bridge of his nose to land on Wu Xingxue.

"How come?"

His voice was deep and low with a hint of gravel from its long silence.

"Because you have the wrong person," Wu Xingxue said calmly.

He assumed Xiao Fuxuan would be taken aback—or at least furrow his eyebrows. But Xiao Fuxuan seemed indifferent and kept him pinned. Wu Xingxue blanked for a second until he came to a realization: The sins of this body's rightful owner must have been so great and caused the downfall of so many that no one was willing to trust him easily.

But I'm innocent! he thought.

"They say that you're the Tianxiu Immortal, and with a title so prestigious you must be able to tell that I…" He made it halfway through the sentence before cutting himself off and glancing in the direction of his underlings.

Xiao Fuxuan finally replied. "Speak. They can't hear you."

They can't hear me?

Wu Xingxue noticed it had been a while since he'd heard anything out of them. It was as though the snow around them had turned into a shroud, a barricade keeping outsiders away. He licked his lips and said solemnly, "You have the wrong person. I'm not him. I'm not the

archfiend you people are talking about."

Xiao Fuxuan stared. After a while, his eyebrows drew together.

"Maybe you're unwilling to trust me because this archfiend was a cunning schemer who lied all the time," Wu Xingxue said, a bit resigned. "That's normal, I suppose. But I'm really not him. I'm not even from here. If you're like the gods in a novel, then you must be able to divine that I'm just a hapless roaming soul at best. Would you like to examine me and see for yourself?"

He lifted his left hand to expose the vulnerable underside of his wrist.

Xiao Fuxuan's eyes followed his movement. Still, he said nothing. Wu Xingxue was certain that Xiao Fuxuan didn't believe him. His plea had been futile.

Forget it, he was about to say, when Xiao Fuxuan opened his mouth again.

"Then what is your name, and where did you come from?"

Wu Xingxue's eyes snapped up to Xiao Fuxuan. He had to collect his thoughts.

"Well, I come from a place called Magpie Haven, and it's *really* different from this place. It's hard to explain in a few words. You're a celestial, so you must know a lot. Do you know any way to help me?"

"I'm a numen of penance. All I do is catch people and punish them."

Wu Xingxue's wrist was still raised, but after having nothing to say to that for a moment, he let it drop with a loud clang. His expression seemed to make Xiao Fuxuan think of something; he watched Wu Xingxue until he averted his gaze, straightened, and pulled the sword from the ground.

Huh, that was sudden. Does this mean he believes me? Wait, that's not right either…

The sharpness and chill retreated from his neck, and Wu Xingxue picked himself up from the ground. As he steadied himself, Xiao Fuxuan returned the sword to its scabbard. It slid home with a clang, and the howling blizzard swirling around them halted.

Ning Huaishan and the others were frozen in stiff, awkward poses

as though cast in stone. When the snowstorm disappeared, they came alive again.

"Archon!"

Ning Huaishan seemed to have lost whatever time had elapsed, his mind still frozen in the instant Xiao Fuxuan pinned Wu Xingxue to the ground. He had just started to fret—"Archon, what is that body?"—when he saw Wu Xingxue standing there unharmed, Xiao Fuxuan at his side. Baffled, Ning Huaishan stopped talking. He looked at his archon and then at the Tianxiu Immortal.

"Th-that surprised me earlier! Did it try to fight you because there's a little residual spiritual consciousness left in the shell?"

A bit of residual consciousness couldn't possibly move like that, Wu Xingxue thought.

"How about now?" Ning Huaishan inspected Xiao Fuxuan. Despite a twinge of trepidation, he was alight with excitement. "That means you succeeded, right? Is this shell your puppet now? If so, then we've made out like bandits! All puppets are devoted protectors, and they never disobey an order."

Xiao Fuxuan gave Ning Huaishan a rather cold look. Wu Xingxue was about to tell him that this was no puppet, but before he had a chance to speak, cries rang out all through Tealspire. The world shook beneath their feet. The white jade sarcophagus where Xiao Fuxuan once slept crumbled into nothing. The great tree swayed back and forth. A crack opened in the earth as jagged stones fell from above, and the sound became almost deafening.

"Looks like this is the end for Tealspire. The whole thing's coming down!" the underlings cried. Boulders rained down, and they were still thirty-three levels below ground. Getting out was nigh impossible. "Archon—"

As the underlings shouted, they were somehow separated from him. Their voices faded into the distance. There was no way to know if they survived.

Out of nowhere, a cliff face broke free, its jagged bottom as sharp as the tip of a sword and hundreds of feet long. If this giant shard of rock fell on a mortal, it would go right through their head, killing them instantly—and Wu Xingxue was in its path. The ground beneath his feet was collapsing as well, until only one unyielding stone remained.

Emptiness yawned on either side of him. He stood on this last stone in a cloud of blue mist. As his life hung by a thread, he looked up at the sharp point falling toward him.

In the next instant, countless gold swords branded with the character *Mian* swarmed in from every direction to defend him. He couldn't see anything, but he felt for a second that someone had shielded him.

The fall of the Northern Domain of Tealspire sent a great tremor through the Boundless Sea. As the clan disciples rushed to deal with the aftermath, a small black-canopied boat crossed the Whirling Way at the sea's edge.

Leaning silently against a corner of the boat, Wu Xingxue huddled beneath the awning and hugged a hand-warming stove. A paper lantern hung above him, and though it swayed in the breeze, the flame's long tongue never seemed to lick its paper walls.

Wu Xingxue had lost most of his underlings when Tealspire collapsed. He only found Ning Huaishan and the one whose arm had been destroyed. Xiao Fuxuan helped Wu Xingxue dredge them out of the sea and onto the boat.

The ordeal had taken quite a toll on One-Arm, who fell asleep as soon as he got in. Ning Huaishan was in good shape to begin with, however, and remained as talkative as ever. Outside the cabin, he wrung water from his robe, then came in again, rubbing his hands.

"Archon, we're going to be at the White Deer Ford soon," he reported. "Did you hear that just now, that thunderclap over by the Boundless Sea's Snowmelt Tarn? Wow, was it ever loud!"

Wu Xingxue had no idea what he was so excited about. Fortunately, Ning Huaishan was a chatterbox and clarified.

"You can see just how far the collapse of Tealspire hit. The cultivators who were outside trying to surround us must have been caught in quite the mess. Their bad time is a great time for me. Just think about them, then look at us." He glanced at the man across from Wu Xingxue. "Usually, people only ever get *into* Tealspire. They don't get out. Who'd have guessed? We've got ourselves an enchanted relic! Archon, you're the best after all. You figured out we had to turn the Tianxiu Immortal's shell into a puppet. Who would know the way out of Tealspire better than him? The rumors didn't deceive. This puppet really does do everything you tell it to, and it's so devoted to you. Good thing the Tianxiu Immortal has perished. If he ever finds out from the underworld that the shell he left behind to guard Tealspire saved the archfiend of Nightgleam, that would be really…"

He trailed off and clicked his tongue several times.

There's no need to find out from the underworld, thought Wu Xingxue. *He's right here listening to you ramble on.*

Either way, he was happy to watch the show and listened with gusto as he looked unapologetically across the boat to where Xiao Fuxuan stood with his broad shoulders and trim waist. He was leaning against the awning with his sword in his grip. Xiao Fuxuan stared

expressionlessly as Ning Huaishan clicked his tongue once more.

Words seemed to be written in Xiao Fuxuan's eyes: *Why are you still alive?* If looks were swords, Ning Huaishan's head would have been gone.

Wu Xingxue watched the indescribable expression on the Tianxiu Immortal's face for a while until, unable to hold it in any longer, he started to laugh. Cowed, Ning Huaishan snapped his mouth shut.

Hearing laughter, Xiao Fuxuan turned. When he looked at Wu Xingxue, his eyes peering out from beneath his thin eyelids, his pupils reflected a gleam of lantern light. He quickly averted his gaze again toward the outside of the boat, his feelings complicated. Nevertheless, he continued to play puppet.

At least when Ning Huaishan shot off at the mouth in the Northern Domain of Tealspire, Xiao Fuxuan would have been on the right side of the law.

Not anymore. He'd flagrantly broken an archfiend out of jail, so in mixed company, he had no choice but to play puppet.

"Archon, we've expanded Nightgleam again," Ning Huaishan said. "Even what used to be Lang Province and the Valley of Laments is part of our territory now. In a bit, we'll cross White Deer Ford, and we can go right into the city on the western shore."

The night grew deep and cold. Ning Huaishan yawned and soon joined One-Arm in slumber, filling the cabin with his thunderous snores. He had no idea that, shortly after he closed his eyes, the one he referred to as a puppet broke his golden silence.

"Why didn't you get out of the way when the cliff fell?" Xiao Fuxuan murmured, drawing his gaze back from outside the boat.

Wu Xingxue, who had been nodding off as he held on to his hand-warming stove, raised his eyes momentarily at these words. He stared drowsily at Xiao Fuxuan for ages before realizing what he meant.

"How would I have gotten out of the way?" He slowly closed his eyes again, and when he next spoke, the words came out in a mumble. "There was no escape to either side of me. I'm no Shiva with three heads and six arms. I told you I'm just a mortal, but you won't believe me." He looked as though he was already asleep, but after a while, he whispered, "Xiao Fuxuan."

Xiao Fuxuan glanced up sharply. He saw Wu Xingxue, eyes still closed, push the hand-warming stove deeper into his sleeve, the bones of his exposed wrist slender and elegant.

"If you don't believe me, then why did you just save an archfiend?"

Xiao Fuxuan did not reply. The questioner did not care to wait for an answer either; his eyes never opened, and soon he was asleep.

Ning Huaishan blabbered Wu Xingxue awake. Apparently, the underling was concerned about some business in Nightgleam and wanted Wu Xingxue to return there as soon as possible.

"This ain't right. I was the one who put the pole down, and I set the boat on a course west. We ought to be disembarking at White Deer Ford right about now, so how the hell did we end up changing course? Now we're going to be late getting back to Nightgleam…"

Of course, Wu Xingxue would never agree to that. Nightgleam was a fiends' lair. He'd be crazy to go there. Eyes half open, he listened to Ning Huaishan for a while and finally understood that someone must have moved the orienteering pole in the middle of the night. Since Ning Huaishan and One-Arm had both slept like pigs, it was obvious who'd done so. The Lord Immortal, still playing puppet, turned a deaf ear to the protests.

"Stop making a fuss. Which way is it going now?" Wu Xingxue asked blearily, eyes still half closed.

Ning Huaishan wilted. "Judging by the direction, we'd have to go around the city of Spring Pennant."

The City of Spring Pennant… Spring Pennant?! Wu Xingxue perked up immediately. He remembered the words he heard previously: A savant named Yi Wusheng resided in the city of Spring Pennant. If Wu Xingxue wanted to go home, he could ask Yi Wusheng for help.

Xiao Fuxuan was the one who'd changed the boat's direction. Could it be that he had finally thought it over, believed Wu Xingxue's words, and decided to ask Yi Wusheng for assistance?

It was true that the sooner they sent Wu Xingxue back to Magpie Haven, the sooner the archfiend could return to this body. Then, whether it was beheading or imprisonment, it would have nothing to do

with him anymore. Wu Xingxue hoped that Yi Wusheng was a kindhearted, easily swayed person who would believe his story and be happy to help.

They disembarked near dawn. By the shore hung a white banner embroidered with the words *Swallow's Landing* in blue alongside the image of a swallow. It was supposed to be the hour of sunrise, but the air at Swallow's Landing was thick and gloomy with fog.

The only people around were two youngsters bearing swords—disciples of some clan or other. As Wu Xingxue walked across the wooden bridge toward them, he noticed that they looked uneasy. Each wore a half-palm-sized wooden idol around his neck. That was not the end of it. Almost every stone pillar on the embankment behind them bore carvings of graven images. Each pillar was covered in enough idols to encircle it.

As soon as Ning Huaishan and One-Arm got to shore, they dropped into a crouch. "Why are there twice as many idols here now as there were a few months ago? I told you we shouldn't go this way. We *shouldn't*! Can't you see this is killing me?" Ning Huaishan wrapped his arms around his head and looked extremely uncomfortable indeed.

Before they'd left the boat, Wu Xingxue had heard Ning Huaishan mention it. Although Urbs Caelestia had perished, the people still loved to carve idols. Their idols were celestial-touched thanks to an abundance of offerings and incense. Though it wasn't enough to exterminate fiends, it could make them unwell. Nowadays, most cultivation clans congregated in Reverie, Brightwater, and Lang Province, which were relatively safe. Other areas could only rely on minor clans, lesser sects, and idols like these to help them survive. Even so, they were unable to repel the fiends who grew more brazen by the day.

Without Urbs Caelestia, after all, cultivators had no hope of ascension, and so the righteous path led to a dead end. Meanwhile, the fiends on the infernal path, unfettered by restriction or morality, had plenty of shortcuts to take. The less one was burdened by conscience, the longer one might live. So it was no wonder that Nightgleam, the fiends' lair, grew ever bigger and more populous. Over the past two years, even Reverie, Brightwater, and Lang Province were beset by chaos, forcing the locals to cover the harbors, river crossings, and city

gates with graven images of gods—Swallow's Landing included.

Compared with how Ning Huaishan and One-Arm reacted, it was downright astonishing how easily Wu Xingxue handled it. He stood surrounded by the idols but remained unaffected, and he had the wherewithal to listen to the idle chatter of the two sword-bearing disciples.

"Say, since the Northern Domain of Tealspire has fallen, what's going to happen now? Won't those filthy fiends be even more brazen?"

"Who knows how many more years we can guard this place…"

"It's hard to say." He sighed. "Did you hear? A senior sister who went to Tealspire came back yesterday. She said that the archfiend Wu Xingxue might still be alive! After Tealspire collapsed like that, he might already be out."

"Pshaw, don't be so pessimistic. He won't make it."

Foolish child, he would, Wu Xingxue thought. *He's not just out, he's right here listening to you scoff at him.*

As he considered whether it was feasible to leave his two deadweights, Ning Huaishan and One-Arm, outside the city, Wu Xingxue heard another bit of the conversation from the defeatist disciple.

"If the archfiend really did get out, where do you think will get hit first? Why do I feel like panicking?"

"Now, now, don't panic," the other said. "No need to guess. Spring Pennant here will get hit first for sure!"

His companion stared at him.

"Just think about it. How many people in this city do you think have a bone to pick with him? The Gao Clan, Shen Clan, and oh yeah, there's Dr. Yi Wusheng too. His older brother, father, wife, and daughter all died at the archfiend's hands. What a terrible way to go…"

It took Wu Xingxue a minute. "Wait, which Wusheng?" he asked. "*Which* Wusheng?!"

Xiao Fuxuan dipped his head. "Yi Wusheng. The one you wanted to see."

After a moment of silence, Wu Xingxue turned and walked away. It was foolish to think anyone would help him with anything. He was

better off just living in the archfiend's body for the next hundred years.

Chapter 5:
Hua Clan

OF COURSE, Wu Xingxue didn't leave. First, they'd already made it to the city gates, and it would be a shame to walk away. Second, he had no other place to go.

After Wu Xingxue and his group had loitered by the pier for a bit, the two armed disciples came over.

Wu Xingxue noticed that each of their swords' silver silk tassel was adorned with a purple-jadeite peach blossom. The word *Hua* was carved into the identification tablets worn at their waists, so they must have come from a certain Hua family. If their task was guarding crucial areas like the harbor and the city gates, they must have been high status, a prestigious family among cultivation clans.

The two disciples saluted them. "Are you gentlemen planning to enter the city? There has recently been disaster nearby, so both entry and exit are more strictly monitored. We mean no offense. Please bear with us."

They turned to Ning Huaishan and One-Arm with wariness on their faces. "Are these two…feeling unwell?"

Wu Xingxue couldn't fault them for being suspicious. Ning Huaishan and One-Arm had been swooning and retching at the idols since they landed, reacting to them in a most fiendish way indeed. If they hadn't been accompanied by Wu Xingxue and Xiao Fuxuan—who didn't react at all—the two disciples would likely have already drawn their swords.

Ning Huaishan wasted no time explaining himself. He squeezed his fingers together, making his fingertips sharp as knives. Wu Xingxue grabbed him and pushed him back.

"They're seasick."

"Oh…" The disciple glanced at the black-canopied boat, skeptical. "Where did you gentlemen hail from?"

Since his archon wouldn't let him fight, Ning Huaishan could only wipe his mouth and speak. "We came by Whirling Way on the

Boundless Sea."

This time, the two armed disciples believed them. "Oh, no wonder! The storm raged over there all through the night. It must have made it difficult to navigate." They kept glancing at Xiao Fuxuan, but before they could say anything, Ning Huaishan butted in.

"This is the puppet that belongs to our Ar—to our young master, Mr. Cheng."

Xiao Fuxuan did not utter a word.

With a mouth like that, Wu Xingxue thought, *if Ning Huaishan sticks around here for two days, everyone in town will know our secrets.*

But a puppet on its own was not unusual; cultivators also liked to use them, especially as the world fell further into chaos. It was a common sight for the young master of some rich family to travel with a few puppets as bodyguards. It was just that *this* puppet's height, features, and overall bearing stood out far too much. In addition to being eye-catching, it made the two disciples second-guess themselves. Restrained by their upbringing, they did not stare at Xiao Fuxuan to get a better look, but Wu Xingxue heard them whispering between themselves as they left.

"I'm telling you, we've seen that puppet somewhere before. How come it looked so familiar that it's giving me déjà vu?"

"Yeah? Actually, that Mr. Cheng looked familiar too…"

Wu Xingxue held his tongue.

Only Wu Xingxue and Xiao Fuxuan entered the city of Spring Pennant. The city had just erected a huge stone idol that stood on the road past the city gates, and the idol's bronze platform was filled with incense and swirling with smoke. Ning Huaishan and One-Arm turned sickly green on the spot. Waving behind them, they fled—exactly as Wu Xingxue had hoped they would.

"Archon, we'll wait for you in the mountains outside the city," they called as they disappeared.

Once the two hindrances were gone, Wu Xingxue dragged Xiao Fuxuan into an alleyway.

"Lord Immortal, help me out. It's probably unwise for me to go to

Yi Wusheng's house looking like this. I'll just be asking for a beating. Help me change my face around a bit, all right?"

Wu Xingxue walked some distance into the long alleyway and only turned back once he confirmed it was unoccupied. That's when he noticed that, though Xiao Fuxuan had let him drag him into the alley, his inscrutable gaze was fixed on Wu Xingxue's hand on his wrist. Wu Xingxue froze for a second before letting go. Only then did Xiao Fuxuan lift his eyes.

"Is this how you usually ask for help?"

Wu Xingxue raised an eyebrow. "How do you mean?"

Xiao Fuxuan's eyes swept over Wu Xingxue's careless, grabby fingers before shooting a glance at the alleyway. The alley was narrow, and he was so tall his figure blocked most of what hazy daylight there was.

Okay, this spot might be a little too *secluded.*

A smile flickered over Wu Xingxue's face. "I don't usually ask for help, and you don't see many twisty alleyways like this one in Magpie Haven."

This was true. In Magpie Haven, he didn't have to say a word; all he needed to do was stretch out a hand and someone would put whatever he wanted into it. He'd never had to ask for help.

"Can't say I've ever had to avoid attracting attention to myself," Wu Xingxue admitted.

Xiao Fuxuan eyed him for a moment, then asked, "A glamour, right?"

Without waiting for an answer, he switched his sword to his other hand, bent his head, and placed a curved finger to the edge of Wu Xingxue's chin. He stroked his thumb softly over Wu Xingxue's cheek, jaw, and forehead.

"Don't make it too ugly," Wu Xingxue couldn't help saying.

Xiao Fuxuan did not respond. His fingers paused for a moment, then he continued without a word.

"Too late," he eventually said in a low tone.

Fine… Wu Xingxue gave up the struggle and let Xiao Fuxuan adjust as he wished. The alley was truly too secluded and too quiet;

even a moment seemed to last forever.

“Done yet?” Wu Xingxue asked.

“Mm-hmm.” Xia Fuxuan had dropped his hand, but after a brief pause, he lifted it again to adjust Wu Xingxue’s eyebrows and eyes.

“Huh? What is it?”

“It’s nothing.” Xiao Fuxuan was rather swift and did not tarry for a moment, heading out of the alleyway immediately after applying the glamour. As he turned around, Wu Xingxue heard him say, “Your eyes are too recognizable.”

Wu Xingxue stared for a beat before catching up to him with broad strides. “Xiao Fuxuan.”

The man before him turned his head just a smidgen.

“You’d better alter your appearance too. Since they’re so fond of carving idols and you’re so famous, there must be plenty of your likenesses around. Even if idols never look anything like the real thing, we don’t know for sure that some master sculptor hasn’t captured your essence. It’d be bad if someone recognized you.”

It wasn’t until he emerged from the alleyway and stood blinking against the daylight that Wu Xingxue realized his warning was unnecessary. Xiao Fuxuan was a celebrated immortal. What harm could come from someone recognizing him? He was about to correct himself, but as Xiao Fuxuan turned in profile to wait for him to catch up, Wu Xingxue saw that he’d already altered his face.

Spring Pennant was no one-horse town and housed six cultivation clans of varying prominence. The Hua Clan was the most famous and had the greatest number of disciples.

The clan resided on Peach Blossom Isle in the heart of a lake bordering Spring Pennant’s west side. The island’s isolation spared them the need to draw wards and fight the other cultivation clans for territory inside the city walls. Plus, a major cultivation clan like theirs could guard the western side of the city; after all, Swallow’s Landing, on the west side of Spring Pennant, had the highest number of outsiders. They were a mixed bunch. Despite a thousand precautions, fiends managed to get in from time to time, and each infiltration was a genuine nightmare.

Many fiends used to be human. They appeared as commoners and spoke in common parlance. Some of them had once lived in the city before taking the infernal path. It was impossible to pick them out once they became part of a crowd. The methods which fiends cultivated were too duplicitous. They were cunning and capricious, could entice one to madness, and craved blood.

The fiends known as huskreavers were particularly troublesome and grueling to catch. They fed on the flesh and spirit of the living. After devouring one body and leaving nothing but a husk, they moved on to the next. The process was almost completely undetectable. Twenty

or thirty years ago, even during the less prosperous years, there were at least two hundred thousand households in Spring Pennant. Two years ago, only a hundred thousand were left. Now, merely two years later, it had dropped to seventy thousand.

Although Spring Pennant still covered the same amount of land, the number of empty, abandoned homes kept increasing. The closer one got to the city walls, the more silent and lifeless Spring Pennant became. All the houses Wu Xingxue saw along the way were empty and covered in thick cobwebs. Midwinter winds whistled through holes in the windows and doors, whimpering like the drawn-out cries of ghosts.

Only places close to cultivation clans held any sign of life. Like ants crawling around sticky-rice candy, occupied houses surrounded each cultivation clan but for one—the Hua Clan.

There was nothing exceptional about that. Because the Hua Clan alone guarded Peach Blossom Isle and the entire East River, it was an isolated and dangerous place to begin with, easy to invade and hard to defend. On top of that, since the Hua Clan had so many disciples, the consequences of a few fiends slipping by unnoticed would be unimaginable. If commoners with no knowledge of thaumaturgy—and thus no way to defend themselves—settled there, they would be like so many unguarded delicacies left in open bowls, constantly luring fiends to eat their fill. Peach Blossom Isle would never have a single day's peace. If a cultivation clan could not hold their ground, common folk suffered as well.

Having heard such comments about the Hua Clan, Wu Xingxue had already deemed Peach Blossom Isle accursed ground and told himself that he mustn't travel to such a dangerous place. Still, two hours later, he and Xiao Fuxuan stood on the bridge leading to Peach Blossom Isle, engaged in a stare-off with the initiates guarding the bridge.

"Now wait just a second," Wu Xingxue said, grabbing hold of Xiao Fuxuan and dragging him back to shore. "Didn't you promise you'd take me to Yi Wusheng? So why do all twelve banners on either side of this bridge say *Hua*?"

"Tell me the truth," said Xiao Fuxuan. "Do you really know Yi Wusheng?"

"Isn't his surname Yi?"

Xiao Fuxuan was speechless. His brows drawn together and expression cold, he watched Wu Xingxue.

"Who gave you the idea that every single one of the Hua disciples was part of the family and none had other surnames?" Xiao Fuxuan asked.

"Why didn't you say so earlier?" Wu Xingxue grumbled.

Did you even ask? Xiao Fuxuan thought.

He kept his face neutral as he tipped his chin toward the island in the distance. "I've had some dealings with Yi Wusheng, so this is the right place. He's one of the Hua Clan's four elders. Besides, it's not as though he's unrelated to the Huas."

"How are they related?"

"Yi Wusheng's wife was the younger sister of the Hua Clan patriarch, Hua Zhaoting." Xiao Fuxuan looked down at the fingers Wu Xingxue had wrapped around his wrist. "How long do you plan to stand here on the shore, holding on to me and stalling?"

As he could stall no longer, Wu Xingxue let go and followed Xiao Fuxuan to the bridge, muttering all the while. "How does an immortal who lived in Urbs Caelestia become so familiar with what goes on in the mortal world anyway?"

Xiao Fuxuan did not answer. It wasn't until they were almost on the bridge, the dumbfounded disciples bowing to them with their swords in their arms, that Xiao Fuxuan said, "Someone used to like to visit."

Wu Xingxue paused in surprise.

A disciple spoke up then. "Dr. Yi Wusheng is still in seclusion, meditating in the rear hall. We've already informed the patriarch. He told us to lead you gentlemen to the Hall of Contemplation. He will be by shortly. This way, please."

Wu Xingxue crossed the long bridge and stepped through the Hua estate's gates. As the disciples led them into the Hall of Contemplation, he suddenly put two and two together.

The Hua patriarch's younger sister was Yi Wusheng's wife. Yi Wusheng's father, older brother, wife, and daughter all met their tragic end at the hands of this body's rightful owner. So my enemy is not just the hapless Yi Wusheng, it's the entire Hua Clan—the biggest cultivation clan in

Spring Pennant?

Wu Xingxue contemplated this in silence. *Maybe I should just kill myself. At least it'd be quick.*

Chapter 6:
Madman

THE ROOM THEY ENTERED must have been intended for reception and official meetings. Its setup was understated and simple, featuring intricately carved wooden chairs with square tables on either side. The disciples led them to their seats and brought them each a cup of tea. Wu Xingxue, who did not adhere too strictly to etiquette, picked it up to take a sip right away. It was scented lightly with peach petals.

Several disciples cleaning the room noticed that guests had arrived and bowed to them. There was a long, raised altar in the center of the room topped with a jade idol. After offering incense at the altar, the disciples withdrew. The idol looked identical to the giant one just inside Spring Pennant's city gates, but where the city's version was made of stone, the one displayed in the Hua estate was carved from purple jadeite.

"And who would this be?" Wu Xingxue asked quietly, cup in hand.

"Hua Xin," Xiao Fuxuan replied.

Only then did Wu Xingxue realize that *Hua Xin* was written on the scroll hanging behind the idol.

"Do the painting and the jade figure depict the same person? If so, they look quite different," he half whispered.

Instead of speaking, Xiao Fuxuan glanced at the space under Wu Xingxue's nose, hinting that he should close his mouth and stop talking.

Seeing that his interest was genuine, however, Xiao Fuxuan replied eventually. "The painting resembles him more."

The celestial in the painting looked gentle and handsome, and his gently curved eyes seemed to smile on their own. With one hand stroking the back of a white deer and the other holding a lamp, he had the appearance of a guardian deity. His aura was utterly unlike that of Xiao Fuxuan, a numen of penance. Beside the name *Hua Xin* was written his celestial title: *Mingwu*.

In these bleak, chaotic times, there were just over a hundred

prominent cultivation clans. Excluding the minor ones, the most famous had ancestors who had reached apotheosis and become celestials. Hua Xin was the reason the Hua Clan enjoyed such prestige in Spring Pennant.

"Did you know him?" Wu Xingxue asked.

"I did," Xiao Fuxuan said in a subdued tone. "He was the Chief of the Spirit Terrace's Twelve Immortals."

Chief of the Spirit Terrace's Twelve Immortals…the Spirit Terrace's Twelve Immortals… It sounded familiar to Wu Xingxue, and after a moment, he recalled Ning Huaishan reverently bringing it up—he'd killed the Twelve Immortals of the Spirit Terrace too.

Wu Xingxue fell silent. Then he choked on his tea. At that exact moment, the leader of the Hua Clan, Hua Zhaoting, arrived. It seemed he had run into some trouble, and he walked through the winding corridor with huge strides and a displeased expression. Two flustered disciples trailed behind him, holding a box of nanmu wood as they tried to convince him to do something.

"I already said it's unnecessary. A little injury like this warrants no bandages at all. What does a poor simpleton know? He cannot help his recklessness. How many times have I told you already? You can't hold it against him. On the other hand, Chiyao and the others should be punished. Send them to the quiet room where they can contemplate their errors in solitude!"

Scolding complete, Hua Zhaoting entered the room. He had already smoothed his face into a calmer expression. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

He really was related to the Mingwu Hua Xin in the painting. Though Hua Zhaoting did not resemble him *too* closely, it was evident when he smiled that his gentle, clear aura was cut from the same cloth. He did not put on airs as one would expect of the head of a major cultivation clan, to the extent that he didn't come off as a cultivator of the celestial path at all, lacking the haughtiness of those who considered themselves above worldly affairs. In his gestures, he seemed more like a merchant of finer things.

"I was told that Mr. Cheng entered the city this morning and came via the Whirling Way on the Boundless Sea, correct?" Hua Zhaoting asked with a smile.

Wu Xingxue's mind went blank for a moment. *Mister what now? Oh, right.*

He remembered that, when they first arrived at Swallow's Landing, Ning Huaishan had almost blabbed to the two armed disciples before he caught himself and turned the "Ar—" of Archon into "our Mr. Cheng." It seemed the two disciples had reported the party's situation to the clan's leader.

Mr. Cheng it is, Wu Xingxue thought. *Saves me from having to make something else up.*

What was worse was that Ning Huaishan had told them Xiao Fuxuan was a puppet. No wonder Hua Zhaoting had only spoken to him; he did not regard Wu Xingxue's companion as a living person. Wu Xingxue had counted on playing an obedient dummy, leaving whatever they needed to say or ask to Xiao Fuxuan. After all, he knew nothing about this place himself. Now—wonderful!—he couldn't play dumb anymore.

That Ning Huaishan is a goddamn gem.

His face betraying none of the cursing inside his head, Wu Xingxue answered Hua Zhaoting's question. "Yes, last night was terrifying. We never expected to run into something like that. This turned out to be a bad time for a trip. When I came through the harbor this morning, I heard the Northern Domain of Tealspire actually collapsed. Thinking back, it's *truly* scary!" Wu Xingxue patted his knee and continued. "To be quite honest, my legs are still so wobbly that they shake when I exert myself."

Xiao Fuxuan listened to his nonsense like a stone.

Hua Zhaoting nodded. "It is dangerous indeed. When I heard we had guests who came by sea, I was flabbergasted. Some of our elders and disciples were there last night, and when they came back they were in terrible shape, as one can imagine."

"If I'd known, I wouldn't have chosen such a time to trouble you."

Hua Zhaoting waved that off. "It's no trouble at all, Mr. Cheng, and there's no need to put it that way. The Hua Clan adheres to the teachings of the Lord Immortal Mingwu, so it is our duty to keep peace in the area and relieve the worries of others. It's never a bad time." He paused. "I heard from the disciples who greeted you at the gates that you're here to see Dr. Yi Wusheng?"

Wu Xingxue nodded. “Yes, I am.”

“It is widely known that Dr. Yi Wusheng is quite accomplished in the art of somniamancy, and most people who travel to our doorstep come for this very reason. But I wonder if you’ve heard that, in order for Dr Yi Wusheng to cure someone, he has to see the patient in person? You’d need to bring them here.”

“I’ve brought him,” Wu Xingxue said, pointing at himself. “That would be me.”

Hua Zhaoting could not help but look Wu Xingxue up and down. “Mr. Cheng, you really don’t look ill.”

Most people who came to the Hua Clan to see Yi Wusheng did so because their souls had been damaged. Some came because their souls had been partially devoured by fiends and they’d been lucky enough to survive. Some came because they had been attacked with forbidden sorcery. Then there were those whose improper cultivation had led to an energy deviation. These patients were either simpleminded or mad.

Patients like Wu Xingxue, who could string full sentences together, were very rare.

“Well then, Mr. Cheng, what is your problem?” Hua Zhaoting asked.

“My problem is that I’m a living soul who has taken over someone else’s body and squeezed out the rightful owner. I would like to ask Dr. Yi Wusheng if there’s any way to send me back.”

Cultivation clans saw a lot of body snatching, life-trade, and summoning of gods or ghosts. However, what Wu Xingxue described was none of the above. Hua Zhaoting asked him several more questions.

“I understand now,” Hua Zhaoting said once he’d concluded that Wu Xingxue was not hiding anything from him. “Dr. Yi Wusheng is already at the end of his isolated cultivation period. He’ll come out of seclusion by tomorrow. In the meantime, I invite you to stay for the night on Peach Blossom Isle.”

That they were keeping Wu Xingxue on the island meant they had the know-how to help, so there was hope yet that he could go back to Magpie Haven. While Hua Zhaoting spoke to the disciples, Wu Xingxue held the teacup in front of his smiling lips and turned to wink at Xiao Fuxuan. He mouthed the words, *Thank you, Lord Immortal.*

Xiao Fuxuan was still playing puppet, his arms wrapped around his sword, but his gaze traced the shape of Wu Xingxue's lips.

They settled in the western corner of Peach Blossom Isle. The disciple in charge of hospitality told them that there were a great number of disciples and practice began before dawn. Lest the sound of swordplay disturb their rest, they were assigned to the spot farthest away from the Hall of Disciples. The nearest buildings were the library and the Hall of Purification. The former was Hua Zhaoting's personal library, which the disciples did not use. The latter was Yi Wusheng's residence, occupied only by some custodial and alchemy disciples.

Overall, it was indeed quiet, aside from a certain episode that came out of nowhere. As several disciples tidied the guest room, a silhouette dashed in, crying "Ah! Ah!" while moving erratically, knocking over a chair and a basin of water.

"Ayao—"

"Ayao! You mustn't run around in here!"

"Didn't I tell you to keep an eye on him? Why'd you let him barge into the guest room?! He's been so heedless today already. He even managed to hurt the patriarch!"

"Hey, how are we supposed to watch him? He hasn't calmed down once in the past two days! His sword aura flies all over the place, and he's strong too. The patriarch won't even let us use our full strength, but we can't hold him down at all without it!"

Wu Xingxue was in no position to interfere. After stopping a stumbling initiate from falling over, he and Xiao Fuxuan moved out of the way.

The deranged man was disheveled. With his hair down, it was impossible to tell how old he was. He also couldn't speak—his hoarse voice only cried out nonsense. At one point, he reached out to grab at Wu Xingxue. One light push from Xiao Fuxuan neutralized all of his strength before he was frantically dragged away by the other disciples.

"Apologies for frightening you, Mr. Cheng," said the disciple who had greeted them earlier. He was cleaning up the aftermath.

"And he is?" Wu Xingxue asked.

"He used to be Dr. Yi Wusheng's alchemy disciple, the most

talented one, gifted with vital energy. He experienced some trauma, leaving him like this ever since. It's been many years."

"*That* man is a disciple of the doctor?"

"Yes," the disciple said. "Oh, but—no no no, please, don't worry! Our doctor is a real expert of somniamancy. It's not that the doctor isn't capable, it's just that Ayao's madness is too peculiar." As if "peculiar" wasn't persuasive enough, he added, "See, the one who injured him was the greater archfiend Wu Xingxue."

"Who?"

"Wu Xingxue," the disciple repeated, lowering his voice.

Wu Xingxue clammed up. He subconsciously glanced at Xiao Fuxuan, only to discover that Xiao Fuxuan was already looking at him.

"Ayao is truly an unfortunate soul." Having told guests Ayao's story an untold number of times, the disciple's rambling voice filled the room. He said that Ayao, once Yi Wusheng's favorite disciple, had usually been found at Yi Wusheng's side, especially when they'd been refining elixirs. Back then, he'd stayed in the Hall of Purification day and night.

One day, a guest arrived at Peach Blossom Isle, wishing to see Yi Wusheng for help with something. The guest wore a nobleman's face, his manners charming and most refined. From the patriarch to the most minor custodial disciple, no one noticed anything strange; on the contrary, they were quite fond of him. At the time, Yi Wusheng was refining a particular kind of elixir and had no time to spare for the guest's task. He decided to keep the guest on the island for a couple of weeks—a period that cost Yi Wusheng's father, older brother, wife, and daughter their lives.

The night it happened, Ayao ran to the front room in tears, yelling and stumbling over himself, covered head to toe in blood and infernal energy. Yi Wusheng and Hua Zhaoting, who were in a meeting at the time, were horrified. They followed Ayao back to the Hall of Purification to find Yi Wusheng's older brother, Yi Wuqi, lying in a pool of blood. A smiling skin husk was all that remained of him. It was obvious a fiend had sucked him dry.

Nearly every person on Peach Blossom Isle arrived at the scene, and Hua Zhaoting immediately ordered an inspection. But it was too late. As they investigated, they discovered something horrible had

happened to Yi Wusheng's wife, Hua Zhaoting's own sister, along with his father, daughter, and the guest rooms' serving and custodial staff. Tapping the tops of their heads made a *thunk* sound like hitting a wooden temple block, and knocking on their bellies elicited the reverberating thrum of a drum. Over the two weeks the guest had stayed with them, they'd been sucked dry—left empty husks long before that day.

At the time, they grabbed Ayao and tried to ask him what had happened, only to find Ayao's mind hexed and sealed. Even Yi Wusheng could not break the barrier, so Ayao remained unable to tell anyone anything.

As a last resort, Hua Zhaoting sent for help from the Feng Clan of the city of Reverie. The Feng Clan had a secret technique called Soul's Reflection that showed the last thing a person saw before they went mad or died. With their help, the Hua Clan saw the event Ayao couldn't describe in his own words.

In the vision, their guest with the highborn demeanor had revealed his true form. Standing in the Hall of Purification, he squeezed Yi Wuqi's throat with one hand while the other held Yi Wuqi's own sword. Blood dripped from the hilt, pooling into a puddle on the floor. He turned and glanced out the door. Cold, pale moonlight lined the bridge of his nose. He seemed to have noticed someone outside the door and suddenly began to smile. The slight downward curves at the corners of his eyes curled into arcs. Dropping the empty husk from his hand, he tossed the sword, grabbed a clean cloth from the table, and wiped his hands.

In a split second, he stood before Ayao. His palm came down on Ayao's head with moderate force before he left, unhurried, with a breeze in his step. He went the same way he'd come, over the Boundless Sea.

Everyone knew that the archfiend Wu Xingxue carried no sword himself. He was indolent and held nothing he didn't have to. He always killed people with their own swords.

Chapter 7:
A Restless Stirring

"ANYWAY, for a long time after that day, Peach Blossom Isle closed its doors to visitors. We were terrified of running into something like that again."

The disciple's cultivation was still rudimentary, and he was quite young. He probably had yet to form memories when Wu Xingxue was free to do as he pleased. Still, when he spoke of these things, he turned deathly pale. The event had cast a lingering pall over the clan, and the story was passed on as part of their oral tradition.

"Dr. Yi Wusheng was the one most devastated by this. Our patriarch was hit hard as well," said the disciple. "After all, most who fell victim to this crime were his next of kin. The doctor was beside himself with grief and nearly suffered an energy deviation. His health was never the same afterward. Like they say, physicians can't cure themselves, so he goes into seclusion and meditates for a set amount of time each year to recover and not lose himself on the path of cultivation. Even the patriarch was downright unstable back then, and he wouldn't disagree."

Hua Zhaoting was paranoid in those days and saw something wrong in everyone around him—any one of the more than one thousand people living on Peach Blossom Isle could be acting innocuous while waiting for a chance to devour the other residents.

Hua Zhaoting's residence, the Hall of Pruning, had once been home to twelve sword-bearing disciples he had personally trained, and many custodial disciples cleaned and performed various chores there. After Wu Xingxue's attack, Hua Zhaoting had cleared the entire hall. Every last disciple moved back into the Hall of Disciples—not one was allowed to stay. Their illustrious patriarch had thus become accustomed to solitary living. Anything he needed in the Hall of Pruning he had to manage by himself. The custom persisted even now.

"Ever since that day," the disciple concluded, "Peach Blossom Isle's three elders of three halls became four. We added a Hall of Punishments."

“What does the Hall of Punishments do?” Wu Xingxue asked.

“It checks for fiends,” the disciple explained. “The first thing we do when we wake in the morning is report to the Hall of Punishments to let the elder examine our souls. All it takes is a touch to the wrist from the soul-integrity talisman to know whether someone is a fiend or if they’ve been possessed.”

Wu Xingxue looked rather surprised. “Every day?”

“Yes, every day. Twice a day, morning and night. We must make a trip to the Hall of Punishments when we finish training in the evening. Those assigned to patrols around the isle that day are in particular danger.”

The pall Wu Xingxue cast back then sure was long.

“Well,” Wu Xingxue said at last, “that must be hard on the elder who has to repeat the same process day and night. In novels, such people either rise up in revolt or go utterly insane.”

The disciple had no reply to that.

“He’d better examine his own soul too,” Wu Xingxue added.

“Um. He does.”

Wu Xingxue hummed and nodded. “So, was the reason you told me that long story to make it easier to ask?”

The disciple looked at him questioningly. Perfectly at ease, Wu Xingxue pulled up his sleeve to reveal a section of his wrist. The disciple stared at it for a moment, then fished a small talisman embellished with gold paint and the word *Hua* from his pocket. He *had* gone on and on with that old story to justify asking to use the soul-integrity talisman.

There was no other way. All world-renowned cultivation clans valued their reputations and observed etiquette, so they had to uphold the decorum of hospitality at all costs. It would reflect poorly on them if word got around that they dragged guests seeking medical help to the Hall of Punishments for inspection as soon as they walked through the door. The story approach allowed them to gently guide the guests to find an inspection perfectly reasonable—perhaps even necessary.

The disciple shook out the soul-integrity talisman and saluted Wu Xingxue. “Please excuse me. The patriarch said that it is a necessity. We hope you understand.”

“No need to apologize. But your patriarch must have told you that I’m a stray soul who accidentally possessed someone else’s body. Might the talisman mistake my case for a fiend possession?” Wu Xingxue paused. “Plus, I’m not sure whether the rightful owner of this body was good or evil.”

“Don’t worry. Now, I’m not trying to spook you, but even if the owner of your body was an irredeemable monster, you’ll be all right as long as *your* soul isn’t that of a fiend. If some residue of the heinous rightful owner lingers, this soul-integrity talisman will reveal that and won’t hold you accountable.”

“Oh, I see,” said Wu Xingxue, nodding.

As soon as the disciple finished explaining, he tried to stick the talisman to Wu Xingxue’s wrist. Just as it was about to touch him, Wu Xingxue lifted two fingers and blocked it. The disciple’s heart leaped with a jolt. Even the sword-bearing puppet raised his eyes, his weapon seeming to shift. The disciple heard the clink of an invisible chain gently swaying back and forth.

The talisman shook in the disciple’s hand and his eyes snapped to the guest. “What is it?”

Mr. Cheng had above-average looks, but among a cultivation clan’s rarefied and graceful individuals, he was mediocre at best. However, he had a well-shaped pair of eyes that were especially appealing when they caught the daylight coming through the window… so much so that they seemed almost out of place on his face. The thought gave the disciple pause. A split second later, he felt a tingle in his scalp and a chill that flared up from the bottoms of his feet.

Mr. Cheng smiled. “You’re so amusing. Why the panic?”

When he smiled, his eyes got even brighter, like a cold spring washing over black amber. They really didn’t match his face at all. The disciple did not feel much calmer confronted with that expression. His nerves vibrated, and he dared not move a muscle.

Mr. Cheng noticed, and this time his smile grew a bit mischievous. “Wasn’t it a little exciting when I stopped you?”

Why, you little…! If it hadn’t been for the Hua Clan’s upbringing and reputation, the disciple would’ve offered his regards by way of a fist.

“When I arrived, I heard that the left hand is connected to the heart and thus more accurate for the inspection of a soul. I wonder if that’s true.” Wu Xingxue switched to his left hand and rolled up his sleeve. “That should put your mind at ease a little more, shouldn’t it?”

“Of course,” the disciple said. He grumbled silently but kept his thoughts to himself as he pressed the talisman to Wu Xingxue’s wrist.

Soul-integrity talismans from the Hua Clan’s Hall of Punishments were rather famous throughout the world. Some cultivation clans visited the Hua Clan every year to purchase them. The clan often engaged in charity as well, distributing talismans to the city’s commoners each month. In cases of fiend possession, the gold talisman would turn red: Faded red meant the possession had taken hold not long ago and might still be resolvable; a more saturated color meant the fiend was deeply entrenched; and bloodred so deep it was almost black meant a fiend had so completely taken over the body that not a hint of the former occupant’s self lingered.

The disciple stared at the talisman sitting on Mr. Cheng’s wrist and did not blink for such a long time that his eyes grew sore. The talisman showed no sign of changing color.

Thank goodness… That scared me half to death. He said nothing but let out a long, silent sigh of relief. As he peeled off the talisman, he caught a glimpse of the sword-wielding puppet in his peripheral vision.

There were puppets on Peach Blossom Isle as well, used as practice dummies for the disciples or arduous manual labor. To his knowledge, puppets followed only one command at a time. Other than what their masters ordered, they would not make a single extraneous motion. Standing puppets stood without so much as a sideways glance, never speaking a word too many. When he began the examination, however, Mr. Cheng’s puppet had turned its stern and expressionless face to look, keeping a watchful eye on them until the moment he peeled off the talisman—as though it might unsheathe its sword if anything went wrong.

After a moment’s thought, the disciple dug out another soul-integrity talisman and stuck it on the puppet’s wrist.

The tall puppet towered over the disciple, who was young and of average height. When he raised his head after applying the talisman, he got the feeling that the puppet was observing him through its half-lowered eyes. The sense of oppression radiating from it was

overwhelming. Still, the talisman did not darken. In fact, it even seemed to have faded a little.

Well, that's unprecedented. But since the disciple lacked the wherewithal to deal with it, he quickly peeled off the talisman and said he had to run.

Before he left, he cautioned them per the patriarch's instructions. "Peach Blossom Isle is a strategic location, so even if we do two inspections a day, fiends still manage to get here over the lake. A few disciples die this way almost every month, so we patrol every pathway here. You may hear some noises at night. I ask that you be patient with us. Oh, and under *no* circumstances should you go anywhere near the peach forest over yonder. Don't even take a step toward it!"

You're better off leaving that unsaid, Wu Xingxue thought. *Even if I'm not the type to dig my own grave, there are plenty who are. As soon as they hear you say something like that, even the incurious will be intrigued.*

Fortunately, the disciple did not keep him in suspense, adding with a stern face: "We bury every last fiend we catch on Peach Blossom Isle there, along with every last person a fiend devoured. Have you ever seen those centipedes that keep moving when they're cut in half? Fiends are just like that. They still grow restless when they feel impelled—even when they're dead."

Wu Xingxue looked perplexed. "Then why have you kept them?"

"They can be useful."

"How so?"

"Like, say we were invaded at night, when the fetor is at its strongest, by an invader stronger than any of those buried in the peach forest. The fiends buried in the dirt would become agitated and feel drawn in the invader's direction. Such is the nature of fiends."

This was true of all who cultivated the infernal path; they didn't care for sentiment, only subjugation. The weak succumbed and instinctively stayed close to the strong. That was how Nightgleam, the fiends' lair, came to be. Otherwise, how could a bunch of fiends and infernal cultivators with no compunction about killing end up with an archon?

"If they started a commotion and moved in the same direction, we'd notice it, which would make it easier for us to start searching. We

rarely get a chance to use this method, though, since those buried there are truly malevolent. When would they run into something aggressive enough that they'd go on the prowl? At any rate, please don't go looking for trouble."

The disciple needed to hand in the used talisman, so he left his odd guests in a hurry.

Wu Xingxue was not a rude person. Peach Blossom Isle had extended its hospitality for the day, and since he neither wanted to cause trouble nor had any interest in exploring the island, he stayed put. He was in no hurry; the only person he wished to see was Yi Wusheng, whom he would meet the next day.

Heavy clouds gathered above Spring Pennant as though it would rain, and evening came in a rush of darkness.

Soon after the disciple left, Hua Zhaoting sent over dinner, which was a thoughtful and cordial gesture. Wu Xingxue pulled his sleeve out of the way and opened his dinner box. He took one look, then opened his mouth only to close it again without uttering a word.

As I expected, the whole box is just the kind of thing cultivators like—vegetarian and plain to a fault but beautifully presented. There was also a plate holding some refined peach-blossom pastries.

Completely disinterested, he closed the food box and sat down beside the table. He picked up the teapot, poured himself a cup of tea, and had just taken a sip when he heard a voice next to his ear.

"Ordinary mortals get hungry."

Wu Xingxue's eyelashes fluttered as he swallowed his mouthful of tea. He waited for Xiao Fuxuan to take the visibly empty chair right next to him, but Xiao Fuxuan continued to stand behind him, as if he had no intention of taking a seat.

Holding his teacup by its edges, Wu Xingxue turned. "You wouldn't say that if you'd seen the feasts I ate in Magpie Haven. Why are you standing behind me? Just trying to look tall?"

A beat. "Ordinary puppets don't need to sit."

Wu Xingxue eyed the patrolling disciples who passed by every now and then. *Fine. By all means, keep standing.*

He poured himself another cup of tea and held it, then muttered above the liquid, “Speaking of which, it *is* strange that I’m not hungry. I wonder if it’s because this archfiend’s body is so powerful it can go without food.”

Despite his disdain for the food box, Wu Xingxue ultimately picked around and grabbed a single peach-blossom pastry. The lamps inside the room were already lit, and the warm yellow light drew zigzags around his eyes, nose, and lips as Xiao Fuxuan’s shadow fell onto the table before him.

After nightfall, there were even more patrols. To avoid suspicion, they did not converse unnecessarily.

During one gap between patrols, Wu Xingxue glanced outside the door and suddenly asked, “Xiao Fuxuan, what kind of a person was the archfiend who had this body?”

It was an odd question to ask, for the name really said it all: “the archfiend.”

For a long time, Xiao Fuxuan said nothing, though Wu Xingxue could feel eyes on him. He couldn’t help turning his head to meet that gaze. The man was leaning against the wall with the sword in his arms, watching him.

“Aren’t you a stray soul who wandered into the wrong body and wants to get back to Magpie Haven?” Xiao Fuxuan asked. “Since you intend to return, this place is nothing but a dream. So what need is there to ask such a question?”

Wu Xingxue just barely narrowed his eyes before turning back around. “I suppose.” He assumed that was the end of the conversation.

But after a long while, Xiao Fuxuan said, “I don’t know what other people think of him, but to me, no matter what form he takes, he is someone I would never mistake for another.”

Wu Xingxue’s gaze glimmered. Whether because of Xiao Fuxuan’s reply or because two disciples arrived to guard the room, they did not speak again for the rest of the evening. Xiao Fuxuan had no need to eat or sleep and stood beside the wall with lowered eyes, diligently playing puppet. Wu Xingxue got ready for bed and curled up under the covers.

During the night’s latter half, a ringing cry of thunder rumbled

through Peach Blossom Isle. It was the time of night when the fetor was at its thickest and infernal energy became impossible to conceal. If there was an incursion, now was when it would become most evident.

An urgent ringing of bells sounded inside the peach forest, followed by the din of anxious voices. Patrolling disciples ran to and fro, each carrying a small silver bell to pass on the warning.

Nearly a thousand disciples crowded into the open areas to find the long-quiet dirt of the peach forest roiling as though every insect that lay dormant through winter had awakened. The next second, the roiling rushed like a burrowing terra dragon in a single direction: toward the guest rooms.

Chapter 8:
Pilgrimage

In his room, Wu Xingxue's eyes snapped open. He was amazed that he'd actually fallen asleep. Most in Magpie Haven had heard rumors of his strange nighttime habits—other people found it easier to sleep when it was quiet, but not Wu Xingxue. He would lie awake all night in the stillness, unable to fall asleep. He liked it noisy.

"We might as well hire ourselves a small theater troupe to sing and beat gongs and drums at my bedside. That way, I would surely be able to sleep through the night," he'd once jested with the old steward at his estate.

The old steward had paled at his words. "It's unsafe to keep strangers around."

He then tied crisscrossing strings of flower-guarding bells to the blossoming trees outside Wu Xingxue's window and began raising a variety of birds to ring the bells each time they alighted on branches.

There was neither a theater troupe nor birds here, and what was more, he was in the company of an attending jailer who stood in the room in eerie silence. Somehow, he'd fallen asleep anyway.

"Xiao Fuxuan," said Wu Xingxue.

As he turned over and sat up, he heard what sounded like the delicate jingling of bells. He almost lost track of where he was, thinking he was back in Magpie Haven, until he remembered that there was no jangling of chains back home. He realized a thread of fine silver silk was tied to his wrist. A silver bell that hadn't been there before was hanging from it, and the other end of the silver thread was tied to Xiao Fuxuan's finger.

Wasn't this bell identical to the flower-guarding bells from his estate? Was Xiao Fuxuan treating him like a flower or bird? Wu Xingxue hooked a finger around the silver thread and raised his head. As he asked these questions of the one who'd tied the bell to him, he noticed that Xiao Fuxuan's head was bowed and his arms were wrapped around his sword. He seemed utterly lifeless.

Could it be?

Astral projection. At nightfall, as soon as Wu Xingxue had fallen asleep, Xiao Fuxuan had released his spiritual consciousness.

Peach Blossom Isle got quite dark at night, obscured by the fog hanging over the water. The Hua disciples patrolled all over the island carrying lanterns.

"How many of our disciples are stationed at the Hall of Pruning?"

"Two. If we send too many, the patriarch will be displeased."

"Right. How many are at Dr. Yi Wusheng's?"

"A few more there. Twelve."

"The doctor will not leave seclusion until noon tomorrow. Have you told the newly initiated disciple? He cannot leave seclusion until then, come what may. If he does, all of his efforts will be for naught. Tell them they must not disturb him, no matter what."

"I've already told them."

As they spoke quietly amongst themselves, they brushed right by Xiao Fuxuan's spiritual consciousness but did not sense his presence. Just like that, Xiao Fuxuan passed through the crowd, venturing into the depths of a bamboo forest.

He was not unfamiliar with Peach Blossom Isle's topography and still remembered what lay in each direction. Deep in the bamboo forest was the library Hua Zhaoting used. While there were no guards in the courtyard surrounding the library, there were several custodial disciples with lanterns and water buckets busily cleaning. Xiao Fuxuan scanned the area and did not stop. Instead, he turned and walked in another direction.

As he crossed an uninhabited corridor, he heard an indistinct voice.

Are you looking for something?

The night was deep and the corridor serene. The voice ought to have startled Xiao Fuxuan, but as he strode forward, his eyes didn't even flicker, as though he was accustomed to its presence.

What could be on Peach Blossom Isle? the voice mumbled, still hazy. Xiao Fuxuan made no reply. He darted in an unwavering line

through corridors, over bridges and flower-lined paths, and into a secluded courtyard with a gate bearing the words *Hall of Pruning*—the residence of Hua Clan patriarch Hua Zhaoting.

There wasn't a single disciple in the courtyard, and it was quiet. The rooms were lit, however, so Hua Zhaoting wasn't asleep just yet. He was watering the planters in a corner with a narrow-mouthed copper pot. Apparently, he was more perceptive than the initiates; as Xiao Fuxuan's spiritual consciousness passed through the door, Hua Zhaoting straightened, walked to the window, and looked outside. It was a while before he withdrew his gaze.

"You're being paranoid," he said to himself, shaking his head with a laugh.

Meanwhile, Xiao Fuxuan had already traversed the courtyard. He was about to leave through the gate again when that voice rang out once more: *Looks like it's not here.*

This time, the ever-perceptive Hua Zhaoting remained unaware, as though this was a voice only Xiao Fuxuan could hear.

His feet never stopped as he headed toward the third location.

Again came the voice, perplexed. *What on earth are you looking for?* It seemed not to care whether Xiao Fuxuan answered and continued talking as if only to itself. *Oh, I know. I know what you're looking for. But even if you find it, so what?*

Finally, Xiao Fuxuan ceased moving. He looked down at his belt and the small pouch embroidered with silver thread hanging from it. He slipped his fingers inside it and loosened the string, exposing part of a white jade idol—the very same one from his sarcophagus. The embroidered pouch was clearly tiny but managed to contain the palm-sized idol. Xiao Fuxuan stared at it for a while, then pulled on the string to close the bag. After that, the indistinct voice did not speak again.

Xiao Fuxuan stood for a time before moving on. This time, he went to the forbidden domain: the peach forest. It was thick with nether energy and heavy with miasma. Disciples whose sole job it was to stand guard surrounded the forest, keeping a close watch on the area. But to an ethereal spiritual consciousness like him, they posed no hindrance at all.

Xiao Fuxuan checked the entire forest and found nothing. As he left, he suddenly felt a twitch in his ring finger, as though it had been

tugged several times from a distance, a sensation accompanied by the soft jingle of bells. It was the thread he'd tied before he left, its other end fastened to Wu Xingxue so that he could return quickly if anything happened. This particular pulling, however, seemed half-hearted, less like something had happened and more like Wu Xingxue was fooling around.

Xiao Fuxuan had planned to return the instant his gaze fell on his ring finger, but then he heard a rumble behind him like a million beetles waking in spring, the entire forest boiling like water in a pot. The fiends buried underground and the disciples who hurried there were all heading in the same direction, like envoys of vassal states journeying to pay homage to the emperor.

After considering this for a moment, Xiao Fuxuan very quietly let out a sigh. Within an instant, his spiritual consciousness returned to its shell.

Lantern light swayed inside the guest room, and the guards posted outside its doors were gone. Wu Xingxue, whom he'd left on the bed, was already up. Their hosts had given him shoes earlier, but he'd blatantly chosen not to wear them and was standing by the window in bare feet with his outer robes draped over his shoulders. He'd opened the window halfway, letting in the wintry winds.

Eyes narrowed, he listened and absentmindedly pulled on the bell's thread. "Xiao Fuxuan, what's going on outside?" he asked as he turned around. "All the noise out there is scaring me."

The Tianxiu Immortal didn't know where to start. Eventually, he parted his lips and said, "No idea. A pilgrimage, perhaps."

Wu Xingxue gave this some thought. "If I ask to whom they're making this pilgrimage, will it come off as a dumb question?"

The fiends underground plowed on at a swift pace, and the Hua disciples followed them as briskly as river winds. Suddenly, the racket outside the guest house courtyard became near deafening. Wu Xingxue leaned against the window frame and stared helplessly at Xiao Fuxuan, who pinched the line between his brows.

A moment later, Wu Xingxue felt the thread's sharp tug on his wrist. Then, Xiao Fuxuan clasped Wu Xingxue's wrist tightly.

"Close your eyes," said Xiao Fuxuan's voice from above.

Wu Xingxue was wrapped in a gust of midwinter wind that flowed thick and humid over the lake. By the time he opened his eyes again, he was standing somewhere else. He peered around. “What is this place?”

His hand still clapped over Wu Xingxue’s wrist, Xiao Fuxuan also took in the area. “Peach Blossom Isle’s Hall of Disciples.”

All the disciples were chasing after fiends, leaving the Hall of Disciples completely deserted.

“Just now, were you in Samadhi, like they talk about in novels?” Wu Xingxue asked as he looked at Xiao Fuxuan askance.

“I was not.”

“Oh.” Wu Xingxue nodded. “If it wasn’t a trance, you must have gone off to search for something.”

Xiao Fuxuan whipped around and stared at him. After a pause, he hummed an affirmative.

“So, what were you looking for?”

“Something…that was taken a long time ago and later returned.”

When Wu Xingxue killed Yi Wusheng’s nearest kin, Xiao Fuxuan had been in Urbs Caelestia. By the time he’d rushed to Peach Blossom Isle in Spring Pennant, he’d only managed to catch bits and pieces of the story. The rumors said that Wu Xingxue had asked for Yi Wusheng’s help as nothing more than a ruse; as an archfiend who acted with impunity, held sway over the entire city of Nightgleam, and had so many fiends and monsters at his disposal, what help could he possibly have needed from Yi Wusheng? He must have only altered his appearance and posed as an ordinary guest for a short stay on Peach Blossom Isle because he was looking for something.

It was said that the Hua Clan possessed a certain celestial relic. When Wu Xingxue left Peach Blossom Isle, the relic disappeared without a trace. No one knew what the relic was nor why Wu Xingxue took it. Shortly after, it was whispered that the relic had returned to Peach Blossom Isle. The day after this rumor began to spread, Wu Xingxue stormed Urbs Caelestia. Before Xiao Fuxuan had time to figure out how these things were related, he’d perished along with Urbs Caelestia.

Now that he was back on Peach Blossom Isle, he intended to track down that relic. Meanwhile, the archfiend who had taken it was right in

front of him with no knowledge of the past, merely nodding at Xiao Fuxuan's reply.

"No wonder," said Wu Xingxue. "I noticed you're always looking around you."

An earthshaking racket echoed once more—this time from outside the Hall of Disciples. After finding nothing in the western guest rooms, the fiends underground had presumably turned right around and dashed here, to the eastern Hall of Disciples.

Wu Xingxue stuck his head out and surveyed the area. "Well, where have you already checked? And where haven't you? Why don't we search the places you haven't been yet?"

"I haven't been to the Hall of Punishments, Hall of Purification, Hall of Scriptures, or the Phoenix Court."

Silence stretched between them like a cobweb.

Thus, at the urging of the greater archfiend Wu Xingxue, Xiao Fuxuan—the Tianxiu Immortal himself—ran circles around Peach Blossom Isle, leading a century's worth of fiends buried beneath the peach forest and the nearly one thousand Hua Clan disciples in their wake in a great plowing of the entire island.

At last, they stopped in the Phoenix Court, where Yi Wusheng remained in isolated cultivation. The Phoenix Court, which should have been filled with an alchemical aura, was devoid of life. Yi Wusheng, who was supposed to be here in isolated cultivation, was gone without a trace.

Wu Xingxue gave the place a once-over but found nary a shadow. "Where did he go?"

Xiao Fuxuan recalled overhearing one Hua disciple telling another that Yi Wusheng must not leave seclusion until noon the next day lest all of his work be for naught, and he said as much to Wu Xingxue.

"What kind of isolation needs to be that strict?" Wu Xingxue grumbled. "And what could have possibly made him break it if he was so close to the end?"

He was about to keep searching when he heard Xiao Fuxuan say gravely, "I see him."

Wu Xingxue turned in the direction of the sound to find Xiao Fuxuan standing next to a second-floor window, looking down from above. He followed Xiao Fuxuan's gaze. Beneath the courtyard, countless "Terra Dragons" were turning the soil as they beelined for him. Amid the cloud of splattering dirt and thick fog, someone was following the fiends, stumbling as he charged in their direction.

Wu Xingxue stared.

"Is that Yi Wusheng? He's here for—"

Xiao Fuxuan's voice was low and deep. "A pilgrimage."

It was said that, if something powerful should invade Peach Blossom Isle in the evening, when the fetor was heaviest, the fiends on Peach Blossom Isle would involuntarily approach the invader. Such was the nature of a fiend, and it could not be suppressed.

Chapter 9:
Murder

BEFORE YI WUSHENG went into isolation, he usually cast restrictive wards inside the Phoenix Court to prevent anyone from barging in by accident and disturbing him. Regular disciples knew the rules, of course, but there was always a chance that the newly initiated might not. Besides, there was also Ayao, Peach Blossom Isle's flailing madman, to consider.

Yi Wusheng's restrictive wards were still active, so the fiends belowground were blocked at the front of the building, unable to advance another inch. Once everything stopped moving, anything still in motion was particularly conspicuous—and Yi Wusheng was still moving. The nearly one thousand disciples pursuing the fiends arrived only to stop short and gape at Yi Wusheng in terror.

"What's going on?"

"Shouldn't the doctor be in isolated cultivation?!"

"Yeah!"

"So, why is he standing here *among the fiends*?"

Nothing but dead silence followed the question. Everyone knew the answer. The way Yi Wusheng stumbled around, seemingly unable to stop himself from charging toward the building, was self-explanatory: Yi Wusheng wasn't standing *among* the fiends; he was one of them. Just like those buried underground, he was attracted to a powerful fiend and had been running across the isle all night.

The Hua disciples, who had never suspected such a thing, were rooted where they stood, unsure what to do next. One person, however, stumbled as he stopped and fell from the crowd.

"Watch out!"

Amid startled cries, the man tripped into the fiend-churned mud and wailed hysterically, rolling and crawling as he attempted to flee. It was none other than Ayao.

"Ayao!"

“Ayao, come back over here!”

The disciples at the front of the crowd were trying to grab him and pull him back when Yi Wusheng abruptly turned his head. Yi Wusheng’s body did not move with it; instead, his neck snapped around in a way no living person’s possibly could.

“Ayao… Oh, Ayao,” Yi Wusheng called with a sigh. His fingers abruptly curled—and Ayao, who had been tumbling on the ground, was hoisted and hauled to Yi Wusheng as though yanked by an invisible rope. Yi Wusheng grabbed him by the neck and dragged him into the house.

“Ayao!”

“Doctor…”

The disciples had already raised their weapons. The intent of close to a thousand swords surged like a raging tempest, but none struck the first blow. Yi Wusheng had trained some of them and saved others by treating their illnesses and injuries. Even those who had no such experiences with him had eaten the nourishing, alchemical dietary soup he concocted.

In this moment, although he seemed neither human nor monster, they still found it difficult to move against him. If they kept holding back, however, Ayao was doomed! Fiends fed on the flesh and souls of the living. They were always hungry, and when they were hungry, they ate.

Yi Wusheng, who had been in isolation for many days, was *ravenous*.

As Ayao was dragged into the Phoenix Court, he kicked and punched and continued to struggle. Yi Wusheng held his captive’s neck in a viselike grip so he could not make a sound; his throat produced only an airy, hollow whistle. The sword aura emanating from Ayao’s body flew around haphazardly, striking everything in the room. In mere moments, the floor was strewn with broken objects. His aura cut many places on Yi Wusheng’s body, but though the wounds dripped with blood, Yi Wusheng seemed unaware of them. He picked Ayao up and brought his nose closer to inhale the scent of the madman’s vital energy. Maroon veins bulged on the back of Yi Wusheng’s hands, making his skin appear as thin as a membrane.

Breath whined from Ayao's throat, and everything above his neck turned so red it was almost purple. His pupils strained to focus as he stared intently at Yi Wusheng.

His face a mask, Yi Wusheng let him stare. He began to fold his other hand over the top of Ayao's head. Ayao froze, then trembled all over, like rice being hulled at harvest—the body's reaction to spirit-flesh gradually detaching from its shell. Even if Ayao was mad, his terror was still palpable.

Finally, he screamed aloud and grasped Yi Wusheng's hand. Through all-encompassing fear, he squeezed out half a word.

"Mas—"

Yi Wusheng froze. At hearing the half-uttered word, his fingers spasmed twice, as though whatever remained of his original spiritual consciousness was fighting to overcome his fiendish instincts. Unfortunately, there was too little of it left. His body twisted several times, and his mouth opened as if to speak, but before the word *Yao* could leave his mouth, his fingers tightened.

Ayao began to scream.

A bright white light flashed through the room, so dazzling that Yi Wusheng recoiled. In the next instant, the phantom of a greatsword slammed straight down from the second floor and buried itself in the ground before Yi Wusheng, who let go of Ayao with a start. An icy sword intent knocked him aside so violently that he was thrown into a wooden pillar. Blood gushed from his mouth.

When he raised his head again, Xiao Fuxuan and Wu Xingxue were in front of him. Ayao was on his hands and knees, coughing so hard he saw stars. Yi Wusheng wanted to run, but his limbs had gone limp. After a brief struggle to get up, he gave up and stretched out on his back, gasping deeply for breath.

Wu Xingxue bent over, putting a finger in front of Ayao's nose to check his breathing. "Will this little loon live?"

Xiao Fuxuan eyed his movements, then pressed the back of his index finger to the center of Ayao's forehead. He hadn't been sucked dry, and most of his spirit remained. "He'll live."

"He ought to count himself lucky." Wu Xingxue withdrew the hand and mimicked Xiao Fuxuan, pressing a knuckle to Ayao's

forehead.

Wu Xingxue paused, an uncertain look on his face.

Xiao Fuxuan watched him for a moment. “Find anything out?”

“His head’s hotter than my hand.”

Having learned nothing, Wu Xingxue straightened and inspected the blood-spitting Yi Wusheng instead.

He reached out his hand as if eager to touch Yi Wusheng. Xiao Fuxuan could hardly believe his eyes, and he grabbed Wu Xingxue. Keeping his face blank, he guided Wu Xingxue behind him before reaching out to examine Yi Wusheng’s soul himself.

Unlike Ayao, Yi Wusheng was steeped in infernal energy—and since that energy was completely at odds with the celestial energy of Xiao Fuxuan’s body, Yi Wusheng’s reaction was severe. He sprang from the touch and flipped over. Failing to bolt away from Xiao Fuxuan’s palm, he instead ended up face down on the floor. Xiao Fuxuan pressed Yi Wusheng down with just a few fingers against his back, but that was the same as being pinned beneath a mountain to the fiend.

In his struggling, Yi Wusheng had made a mess of himself, leaving his hair disheveled and his clothing rumpled. His sword had also fallen to the floor. Worried he might grab his weapon and try to get up again, Xiao Fuxuan was about to sweep the sword away when he heard Wu Xingxue ask a question.

“Xiao Fuxuan, what’s this thing on the back of his neck?”

Wu Xingxue kept saying he was “just a mortal,” but he sure had nerves of iron. Here he was, half crouched in front of Yi Wusheng, pulling at the back of a fiend’s collar. Xiao Fuxuan frowned. He was about to tell Wu Xingxue to step aside when he saw the back of Yi Wusheng’s neck.

At first glance, it looked like the scar from a wound torn open and then healed again. Clan disciples often fought with fiends, so having some scars and scratches was normal. What made the mark strange was a hint of ink visible at its borders—as if the scars were covering up some sort of mark that used to be there.

“Is it a puppet rune?” Wu Xingxue asked. He seemed to know only about puppet runes, so that was the only guess he could make.

“It is not,” Xiao Fuxuan replied, taking a closer look. “But it’s not

far from one."

The back of a living person's neck was one of their weak points, and any marks made there were usually unique. The most common was a puppet rune, and indeed most marks made on the neck involved manipulation of the soul. Could it be that someone had manipulated Yi Wusheng into cultivating the infernal path, eventually turning him into a fiend? As Xiao Fuxuan bent his head to study the marking in detail, Yi Wusheng paused his struggling and went still. His neck spasmed several times until, with great effort, he raised his head. His rolled-back eyes wandered aimlessly, then gradually focused on Wu Xingxue before him.

For the briefest of moments, he was lucid. At once, he clutched Wu Xingxue's hem, his blood-painted lips parting and closing like a fish out of water.

Help me… Kill me… he mouthed soundlessly, staring at Wu Xingxue.

Wu Xingxue lowered his gaze to look at Yi Wusheng. A similar image suddenly flashed through his mind. He remembered a different lit, secluded room and a spasming, writhing man whose mouth overflowed with blood as he spoke the same words: *I've already eaten so many until they were nothing but husks… Please help me… Kill me… Please…*

"Xiao Fuxuan," Wu Xingxue suddenly began.

Xiao Fuxuan looked up. Wu Xingxue's pupils were black as midnight.

"The Hua initiate mentioned a Yi Wuqi. Was he buried in the peach forest as well? And is he outside right now?" Wu Xingxue asked.

Even before he spoke, something occurred to Xiao Fuxuan. In the next instant, he glided into the courtyard. Patriarch Hua Zhaoting had arrived, and the Hua Clan disciples broke into a noisy uproar. Swords drawn, they were about to charge ahead when a gale materialized in the middle of the courtyard and snow manifested from nothing, forming an airtight barrier that barred them from coming inside.

Xiao Fuxuan paid no heed to the one thousand bystanders. His sword did not even leave its scabbard; he simply tapped his scabbard's tip against the ground. A massive quake rumbled through the earth, and what was once deeply buried was turned over and exposed in an instant. The entire courtyard was carpeted in the husks and severed

limbs of the fiends who had invaded Peach Blossom Isle or the people whom they'd killed.

Among them was Yi Wuqi, Yi Wusheng's older brother, who was rumored to have been murdered by Wu Xingxue. If there was a mark on the back of Yi Wusheng's neck proving that he was once manipulated into becoming a fiend, might there be one on Yi Wuqi's neck as well? If Yi Wuqi's situation was similar to Yi Wusheng's, did it prove that there was some truth to the old rumors?

Expending little effort, Xiao Fuxuan found Yi Wuqi's husk. The victims had once been cultivators, but being consumed by fiends had tainted their bodies with infernal energy. This combination of energies meant their husks would not rot, even after a hundred years in the ground. Yi Wuqi's face looked just as it did when he was found lying in a pool of blood, still wearing that strange and terrifying smile. But Xiao Fuxuan had seen it all; he was as immovable as a mountain. He turned Yi Wuqi's head around and found a scratched-out mark on the back of his neck identical to Yi Wusheng's.

"As I thought," he said under his breath.

He was about to dismiss the blizzard and let the Hua Clan see for themselves when a clear, sharp ringing sounded from the building behind him—like the sound of a sword leaving its scabbard. Xiao Fuxuan froze. He spun around, but all he could see was flickering lamplight. Wrapped in a chill, he darted back into the room.

Though Xiao Fuxuan had only briefly stepped away, the fiend his domineering aura had restrained earlier was now collapsed in a pool of red blood, wearing the same eerie smile as his older brother.

The sword that had killed Yi Wusheng was his own, and the hand that held it belonged to Ayao.

At first blush, it looked like the addled Ayao had climbed to his feet and drawn the sword to give Yi Wusheng a quick death. Ayao's expression, however, was one of confusion. His eyes were open too wide, and he drew loud, hoarse, gulping breaths as he stared down at Yi Wusheng's face in a daze. A layer of cold mist swirled around the sword. Blood dripped from the blade. Xiao Fuxuan's gaze swept over Ayao's vacant face, then over to the only other person in the room.

Wu Xingxue stood beside a red pillar, his empty hands down at his sides. Nearby lanterns gilded him with a sheen of warm light, and he

looked tall and slender in his oversized robes. Hidden in the shadow of his brow and the bridge of his nose, his downcast eyes were dark like spots of ink—but when he raised them, they brightened into morning stars.

Chapter 10:
Rebirth

XIAO FUXUAN'S GAZE DARKENED. He wanted to say Wu Xingxue's name but didn't due to Ayao's proximity.

Wu Xingxue turned to him. A puzzled expression surfaced on his face. "Why are you eyeing me like that?"

Xiao Fuxuan tipped his chin toward the blood covering the floor and poor, mad Ayao. "What happened here?" he asked.

"You're asking *me*?"

Wu Xingxue lowered his gaze to where Yi Wusheng lay on the floor. When they were scampering all over Peach Blossom Isle earlier to evade the fiends, Wu Xingxue had been quite energized. Now, standing next to a puddle of blood, his skin pale and tone somber, he appeared lethargic. Seeing his expression, Xiao Fuxuan frowned slightly, blinked, and looked away. He didn't want to ask anymore.

Before Wu Xingxue could speak, Xiao Fuxuan quietly said, "Forget it."

Xiao Fuxuan flipped the unsheathed sword over in his grip, tapping its tip once on the back of Ayao's hand. Ayao jerked his hand away, and the bloodstained long sword hit the floor with a clang before rolling out of the way. The sword's silver tassel and jadeite pendant were soaked in blood, which lined the name carved on it, *Wusheng*, in red. Ayao stared at the pendant in a daze, then dropped into an exhausted heap on the floor.

Xiao Fuxuan half crouched in front of Yi Wusheng and lifted the hem of his robe. He again touched Yi Wusheng's forehead with the back of a finger. As he began to examine Yi Wusheng's soul, Wu Xingxue moved away from the red pillar. In the lamplight, it appeared as if a gray shadow prowled toward Xiao Fuxuan, stopped beside him, then turned into a ball. Xiao Fuxuan paused, glancing sideways.

Wu Xingxue was very still next to him. He examined Ayao, weak in the knees and stunned, before turning to Xiao Fuxuan.

"Xiao Fuxuan, you thought there was something weird about the

little madman earlier, didn't you?" Wu Xingxue asked, barely above a whisper.

I "thought"? Wasn't it obvious? Xiao Fuxuan's expression grew closed, but he said nothing and waited for Wu Xingxue to continue.

Wu Xingxue, however, was watching him in turn, waiting for a response. He seemed more than content with his lot; one might even describe him as obedient. Xiao Fuxuan was unmoved and kept his silence.

But soon enough, Xiao Fuxuan *did* move. "So. What happened here when I went looking for Yi Wuqi?"

Wu Xingxue glanced to the side like he was remembering. "At first, he was lying flat on the floor, then he leaped up as though he'd just awakened, drew Yi Wusheng's sword, and charged."

When Xiao Fuxuan didn't say anything, Wu Xingxue continued. "And then it was strange. A single thrust from that loon was all it took to slay Yi Wusheng."

Yi Wusheng bore only one wound, right to the heart: quick, uncompromising, and unerring in its accuracy. By the look of it, it really was a single thrust that had ended him. There was no hint of unnecessary movement.

"Have you seen crazy people before?" Wu Xingxue asked.

"I have."

Wu Xingxue nodded. "Well, that makes it easier. If you've seen it before, you must know that a madman in a frenzy can be incredibly strong. Usually, though, his hands are unsteady, and the shaking gets worse the more excited he gets. But Ayao didn't shake at all, and there was no expression on his face. I think…" Lost in thought but serene, Wu Xingxue stared at Ayao, then turned back to Xiao Fuxuan. "I think somebody may have borrowed him for a bit."

Xiao Fuxuan said nothing.

"Who do you think might have done that?" asked Wu Xingxue.

Xiao Fuxuan stared at Wu Xingxue like he'd grown a second head. Eventually, he scoffed. "I don't know. Perhaps I was the one."

With that, Xiao Fuxuan stopped looking at Wu Xingxue.

Wu Xingxue seemed stunned by this answer and did not respond.

The silence stretched on, until he murmured, “Oh.”

Xiao Fuxuan didn’t know where to begin. *That’s right. He dared to say* “Oh” *to that.*

Expressionlessly, Xiao Fuxuan knocked on Yi Wusheng’s forehead. It made a hollow sound like knocking on wood, just like the heads of the countless people killed before him. The only difference was that, beneath the hollow sound, there was the merest hint of a sigh.

Xiao Fuxuan froze. He grabbed Yi Wusheng’s left hand, pressed his thumb to the center of the man’s wrist, and rubbed upward. A small bubble rose below Yi Wusheng’s skin. The next instant, the bubble crawled up his arm like a wandering snake. It traveled over his arm and to his neck, then continued upward. Yi Wusheng’s cloudy pupils suddenly focused. Next, his eyes moved, taking on a gleam in the lamplight…as though he were alive again!

“Xiao Fuxuan,” Wu Xingxue said, forgetting that the onlooker Ayao was still with them. Wu Xingxue lifted his eyes to stare at Yi Wusheng, then turned his unblinking stare on Xiao Fuxuan.

Xiao Fuxuan could see all of this in his peripheral vision but just answered with a soft hum. He did not stop what he was doing or turn to Wu Xingxue. Just as Yi Wusheng was about to open his mouth, Xiao Fuxuan pulled two strips of black cloth out of thin air and covered Yi Wusheng’s nose and lips.

“What’s wrong with him?” Wu Xingxue asked.

“The thrust earlier annihilated the fiend inside his body. What’s in his mouth right now is a wisp of soul left behind after his was gnawed away by a fiend. It’s a remnant.”

The dead could not be resurrected. For the living, once a fiend had attached itself and devoured its host, the only possible deliverance was death. But legends said that Urbs Caelestia had a way to preserve a soul remnant using an immortal’s celestial breath. As long as they did not lose this breath, the soul could live a little while longer.

Though this method existed, few ever used it; once someone reached apotheosis and became an immortal, they could no longer meddle in mortal affairs at will. Celestials had celestial rules to follow. To punish or reward, to live or let die, to save or not save—these things had to be meted out according to the Spirit Terrace’s Heavenly Principles. If immortals interfered in one thing and not another, or

intervened today but did nothing tomorrow, they'd turn the mortal world upside down.

Yi Wusheng was quite confounded himself. He had just been freed from a state of fiend possession. Gone was the strange smile, and in the shine of warm lamplight, his countenance looked gentle. Compared to his previous addled, groggy state, he was a completely different person. A deep line formed between his brows, and he tried to speak but found his mouth and nose bound in black cloth. Looking at Wu Xingxue, he made a drawn-out sound deep in his throat in protest. When he reached up to pull at the black cloth, Wu Xingxue slapped his hand aside.

"He mustn't pull off that cloth, right?" asked Wu Xingxue, though he'd already slapped Yi Wusheng.

Xiao Fuxuan didn't answer, just turned to Yi Wusheng. "Move it and you will die."

Yi Wusheng made the same noise again, but dropped his hand even though he felt terrible.

"Is he really considered 'alive' now?" Wu Xingxue interjected.

Xiao Fuxuan shook his head. Yi Wusheng wasn't among the living; he was only a soul remnant. Even if held here by celestial breath, it was difficult to say how many days he could last. Xiao Fuxuan hadn't done this very often and had few examples to go by.

"He isn't?" Wu Xingxue asked very quietly.

"Just…barely."

"Oh." Wu Xingxue nodded.

After this interlude, his sickly demeanor seemed to have vanished. Yi Wusheng pushed himself up from the floor. As Wu Xingxue stared at Yi Wusheng's wrist, his own thumb twitched once subconsciously, but he didn't notice. Shaking out the hem of his robes, he straightened. He was about to check on the Hua Clan outside when he heard Xiao Fuxuan's low voice ring out.

"Want to learn how?"

Startled, Wu Xingxue spun around. "Learn what?"

Xiao Fuxuan glanced at Yi Wusheng before turning his gaze to Wu Xingxue's hand. It only came to Wu Xingxue then.

"You mean how you saved him just now?" He quieted for a

second, then laughed. “But I don’t have an iota of thaumaturgy or a shred of talent in my body. I can’t learn how to do that. Are you… making fun of me?”

“No.”

“Besides, the novels I read all say…”

Novels again… Xiao Fuxuan went blank for a second and waited for him to continue, but Wu Xingxue had stopped talking.

“What do they say?” Xiao Fuxuan asked.

“They say that…” Wu Xingxue looked at Yi Wusheng and Ayao, then crooked a finger to beckon Xiao Fuxuan. Xiao Fuxuan bent down to get a little bit closer.

Half whispering, Wu Xingxue went on. “All the novels emphasize the separation between gods and men. Whether those in the mortal world live or die, the gods cannot meddle at will. You just saved Yi Wusheng, and now you’re saying you want to teach me—an ordinary mortal—a bit of thaumaturgy. Doesn’t that count as breaking the heavenly laws?” He laughed at his question before he met Xiao Fuxuan’s eyes.

Xiao Fuxuan was tall, and his jawline was slim and sharp. When he looked down at Wu Xingxue this way, it brought the line into even clearer focus. As he spoke, it shivered.

“Hmm…” he said. “No, it does not. Urbs Caelestia is gone, and right now, I’m not the one they call the Tianxiu Immortal. After all, I’m merely a spiritual consciousness that entered this shell. Haven’t you made me into a puppet?”

Wu Xingxue’s glance flickered.

“How could a puppet ever break the Spirit Terrace’s heavenly laws?” Xiao Fuxuan asked. Then, he grabbed a piece of gold, shimmering paper out of nowhere and handed it to Yi Wusheng. “I have some questions for you. Pinch this piece of paper between your fingers, and you’ll be able to speak to us.”

Yi Wusheng took a moment to react before taking the piece of paper. Once he had it, out came the question he most wanted to ask: “Why did you save me?”

“I need your help with something,” Xiao Fuxuan said. He pointed at Wu Xingxue. “In your state, can you still perform somniamancy?”

Yi Wusheng nodded.

“I ask you to please examine his condition later,” Xiao Fuxuan replied before turning to Wu Xingxue. “Yi Wusheng is well-versed in somniamancy. You may not understand what that means, but all he needs is to reach out a hand and examine your soul to discern whence you came and whither you should return.”

Wu Xingxue said nothing.

Yi Wusheng nodded. “I-I’ll try my best.”

For an instant, Wu Xingxue’s expression froze, but it passed as soon as it came.

Xiao Fuxuan gave him another sidelong glance before opening the door leading outside. “For the time being,” he said to Yi Wusheng, “there is one more pressing matter we must deal with, and that’s to explain to your clan how all this came to be—the rumors that circulated all those years ago, for instance.”

“I can’t,” Yi Wusheng said, taking one look at the crowd outside. “The patriarch is here.”

Chapter 11:
The Whole Story

XIAO FUXUAN WAS JUST about to dissolve the blizzard barricading Hua Zhaoting and the disciples outside the courtyard, but Yi Wusheng's words stopped him in his tracks. "You can't?"

"We can't let him hear it." Yi Wusheng looked grave.

"Is there something wrong with your patriarch as well?"

"He is no different than me. The possession took hold a long time ago and is deeply ingrained. You mustn't startle him."

Wu Xingxue took in Yi Wusheng's appearance—the last shred of his soul.

"How long is a long time?" Wu Xingxue asked.

After a pause, Yi Wusheng said in a near whisper, "It's been more than twenty years."

More than twenty years had passed since Yi Wusheng first realized something was wrong inside him. On that day, he was in the Hall of Purification training Ayao on how to handle a newly refined batch of medicine. Though cultivators favored a great variety of elixirs, there were a few types that everyone commonly kept on hand: cultivation aids, longevity extenders, healing poultices, life-saving potions, and life-taking poisons. The rest were rare, strange, and so varied that it was difficult to recall all their names. Each clan made these less common creations for their own consumption, and they tended to take on the originating clan's unique flair.

Yi Wusheng's Dreamsbane elixir, which came in a pill form, was exclusive to Peach Blossom Isle.

He'd refined this kind of medicine because, in that particular year, misfortune plagued a thoroughfare just outside the city of Brightwater called the Valley of Laments. When commoners or clan disciples exited the valley, they seemed perfectly fine, but within three days, something uncanny happened: Marks akin to puppet runes appeared at the napes of their necks, and a phantom itch they couldn't quite place hounded

them. The afflicted would scratch themselves all over, and some scratched themselves bloody, as if struck by madness.

The other symptom was sleepwalking. When they went to bed at night, they dreamed they were ravenously searching for food. After searching for some time, they'd finally find a food stall and sit down there to feast until delicious juices filled their mouths. Suddenly, they'd wake to discover they really had eaten through the night and were holding the leftovers in their hands. Some found fruit or vegetables, some held raw fish or meat, and some held…people.

The condition closely resembled fiend possession. Major cultivation clans could not let it continue. Hoping to determine the cause, they dispatched cultivators one by one to investigate. Unfortunately, caution did not help them; most who went to investigate fell victim to the rune. One could count on a single hand those fortunate enough to escape harm.

In the beginning, the Feng Clan lost the most disciples. Peach Blossom Isle and the Feng Clan had always been on good terms, and so the Feng Clan matriarch, Feng Juyan, and her older brother, Feng Feishi, made a personal call to seek medicine for their afflicted disciples. It only made sense; Peach Blossom Isle's Yi Wusheng was the leading expert on somniamancy, and those marked in the Valley of Laments were so seriously afflicted that they ate human flesh while sleepwalking.

For a time, Peach Blossom Isle had so many visitors that their threshold was almost worn through. Yi Wusheng went into isolation for seven days and did not drink a drop of water, eat a grain of rice, sleep, or rest until he at last created an elixir: Dreamsbane.

If someone afflicted in the valley took a single Dreamsbane pill within a month of being marked, their soul would be sealed away for forty-nine days. When they woke again, they would be back to normal. The only risk of having their soul sealed away for so long was that they might lose one of their five senses.

However, if more than a month had passed since being marked, even taking a whole vat of Dreamsbane was useless; the gods themselves couldn't cure the condition then!

Yi Wusheng spent that entire year refining Dreamsbane, and though he often went without sleep, he was at least able to save many people. Lest the doctor wear himself out, patriarch Hua Zhaoting went

out of his way to instruct the disciples not to disturb Yi Wusheng with any trivial matters. He also selected a number of disciples to help him maintain the Hall of Purification.

Around the lunar Eleventh Month that year, when several weeks had passed without any newly afflicted from the Valley of Laments, Yi Wusheng finally had a bit of free time. That day, he and Ayao buried the very last batch of Dreamsbane in the planter.

“Dreamsbane pills are not the same as regular elixirs, They can’t touch fire, and they must not go into the alchemical refining furnace. We have to bury them carefully in clean sand, three feet deep, water them daily with calm spring water—”

Yi Wusheng hissed.

As he gave Ayao these instructions, he felt an itch at the back of his neck. Frowning, he scratched it.

“Cold water is best, and you must remember to never—”

Yi Wusheng paused, feeling the itch again. He handed Ayao the medicine box he was holding and stepped aside. After scratching a little more, he felt a burning pain on the back of his neck. He decided to go inside, but as soon as he turned around, Ayao gasped in surprise.

“Master,” said Ayao, “your neck is bleeding. Let me get you some salve for it.”

I only scratched a few times and it’s already bleeding? Yi Wusheng wondered before dismissing the thought.

“No need. You keep burying the Dreamsbane. I’ll go in.”

A custodial initiate was inside the house at the time, organizing medicine cabinets and making beds. Noticing Yi Wusheng hurry in with blood on his fingertips, the initiate hastily found some hemostatic salve.

“Doctor, let me help you.”

Yi Wusheng took one look at his sand- and bloodstained fingers and did not protest again. He sat down next to the table and waited for the initiate to apply the salve. After quite a while, however, the initiate hadn’t moved. “What’s the matter?”

The initiate’s voice was faint. “Doctor, your…”

Yi Wusheng turned to find the initiate holding on to a medicine mortar for dear life. The blood had drained from his face.

“Why are you so pale?” asked Yi Wusheng. “It’s not like we haven’t seen cuts and festering flesh around here. Imagine getting so scared over a few scratches!” Yi Wusheng wasn’t sure if he should laugh or cry. Grabbing a cloth to wipe his hands, he was about to take the mortar and apply the salve himself when the initiate’s fingers shook. The mortar fell, spilling salve all over the floor.

Taken aback for a moment, Yi Wusheng lifted the hem of his robes and ran into the bedroom where there were two copper mirrors he could use to check the back of his neck. In his reflection, the back of his neck was covered in deep scratches, so raw they didn’t look at all like wounds made by human fingers. Instead, they resembled the slashes of sharp claws. Beneath the scratches remained a few vestiges of an ink mark that seemed rather similar to the marks on those who emerged afflicted from the Valley of Laments.

Yi Wusheng was chilled to the bone. He set down the copper mirrors and frantically searched the rooms until he found what remained of the last batch of Dreamsbane. For ordinary people, a single pill of Dreamsbane sufficed. He dry swallowed one pill and lay down on his bed without bothering to change his clothes. He reclined there with his eyes open until nightfall, but when his soul showed no sign of sealing, he rose from the bed. With trembling fingers, he poured out a handful of Dreamsbane and swallowed them all.

This time, he did fall asleep—but not because his soul was sealed. He’d refined Dreamsbane with his own two hands, so he knew how it worked better than anyone. For those marked longer than a month, it was too late no matter how many Dreamsbane pills they might take.

He could no longer recollect what came after. Even so, he knew what would happen—the parasitic fiend would be roused, quickly nibble away his spirit-flesh, and take over his body as its new master. “He” would continue to do what he always did, day in and day out, and no one would realize anything was amiss as he awaited the oncoming hunger. Fiends *always* grew ravenous and needed to feed periodically on the spirit-flesh of the living.

Every once in a blue moon, Yi Wusheng regained some awareness, as though a remaining shred of his soul was reluctant to let go and still trying to regain sovereignty. The first time he was briefly lucid, he saw the initiate who had once tried to help him apply salve dusting the bookshelf. The initiate bowed to him and called him “doctor.” Yi

Wusheng knocked on the back of the initiate's head to check. As expected, he heard a hollow thud as if hitting a wooden temple block.

The second time was that cold winter night twenty-five years ago. In the front room, Ayao cried and screamed like he'd gone mad; his older brother, Yi Wuqi, lay smiling in a puddle of blood; and people examining the bodies of his wife, daughter, and father knocked on their heads. They made the same hollow noise as the initiate's had.

Yi Wusheng had been raised among cultivators and was once a dashing young man. That night, he began to look older.

He could recall the reason quite clearly: He exhausted his spiritual core struggling to grasp a thread of his consciousness, then ran straight to the Hall of Pruning where the patriarch resided. He intended to ask Hua Zhaoting to remove him as elder of the fourth hall and hand over all of his current responsibilities. He wanted to ask Hua Zhaoting to kill him. The fiend occupying his body would not allow him to kill himself, so he had to find someone who could overpower him to do it for him.

Yi Wusheng stumbled to the Hall of Pruning and, ignoring all decorum, pushed the doors wide open. Hua Zhaoting was hunched over by the wall to water the planters, a long-mouthed teapot in his hands. When he turned around at the commotion, the exhaustion was clear on his face.

Pointing at Yi Wusheng, he said, "Yi Wusheng, if you were a disciple barging into this place without my permission after I ordered I was not to be disturbed, you'd be severely punished."

Yi Wusheng did not answer. He could already feel his awareness slipping and had to explain before it faded away completely. He crashed into the desk with a bang and grabbed Hua Zhaoting's arm.

"Patriarch…"

In that split second, Yi Wusheng's strength swelled, and he grabbed Hua Zhaoting hard enough to send him sprawling onto the desk for a moment. That was how Yi Wusheng saw that the back of Hua Zhaoting's neck was also covered in half-healed scratches. Beneath the scratches was the vestige of an ink mark. In a flash, Yi Wusheng's pupils contracted, and a chill spread from the top of his head all the way down to his toes.

"What's the matter?" asked Hua Zhaoting.

Yi Wusheng's words stopped short of slipping from his tongue.

"I…I must cultivate in isolation for a while," he said instead.

His face pale but his expression calm, Yi Wusheng turned to glance quickly at Ayao, who was still in a daze.

"Ayao is naturally warmhearted and dependable, someone capable of handling great responsibility. He's a cultivator as well. He wouldn't be frightened into this degree of madness just because he witnessed someone's death. Someone put a seal on him to keep him from speaking clearly. When I returned to the Hall of Purification later, I only had time to do one last thing.

"That was to add another seal on him. No one—no one here, at least—would be able to undo two seals. He will be mad for as long as the seal lasts. I worried that if he woke up, he might say something he shouldn't, and there is no one on Peach Blossom Isle who can help him."

After all, Ayao grew up at Yi Wusheng's side and witnessed the truth of Yi Wuqi's death. Once his head was clear again, he would try to explain everything to Yi Wusheng. If he saw the mark on Yi Wusheng's neck, he'd end up just like the custodial disciple.

Yi Wusheng walked through the darkness of the courtyard and looked out at the shadows beyond the artificial snowstorm. "After that day, I was never lucid again. Not until today. As long as the fiend isn't disturbed into erupting violently, twenty-five years can pass just like that. The patriarch, who cultivated the path of the sword, is one of the closest to achieving apotheosis in the past century. If the fiend inside his body is disturbed, we don't have anyone here strong enough to stop him. Even a thousand Hua disciples of Peach Blossom Isle could not—"

Before he could finish, Yi Wusheng gaped in surprise at a phantom sword drawn from the scabbard at Xiao Fuxuan's side.

"Y-you absolutely mustn't!" Yi Wusheng shouted in such a panic that he disregarded etiquette.

"Hey, you're too late. Just take it easy for a bit." Wu Xingxue pulled him back and turned to find Xiao Fuxuan swirling with sharp, hoarfrost-bitten sword intent. He cocked his head. "Yi Wusheng, what level do you think his cultivation is?"

“Nearing apotheosis!” Yi Wusheng cried.

“*Nearing*,” Xiao Fuxuan repeated in a subdued tone. “I see.”

As he uttered these words, the phantom sword crossed the sky and transformed into a million golden rays of light. Accompanied by thunder from the ninth heaven and veiled in a dazzling barrier of snow, the sword came unerringly down to strike Hua Zhaoting!

Chapter 12:
Dreambell

In the eyes of the Hua disciples, ages had passed since the patriarch Hua Zhaoting last used his own sword. After the fall of Urbs Caelestia, the few cultivators nearest apotheosis became paragons unrivaled in the mortal world even as ever more brazen fiends ravaged the land. Because every fiend eradication was the joint effort of many clans, situations requiring Hua Zhaoting to use his true strength were few and far between. The last time was many moons ago in Twilight Fen, when the Hua Clan inevitably clashed with the fiends of Nightgleam. With a single thrust of his sword, Hua Zhaoting had stopped a fiend known as Mahakala from completing some evil errand on behalf of his archon, Wu Xingxue.

Hua Zhaoting cultivated the path of the sword, and his refined and accommodating speech was merely a disposition fostered through years of interacting with others and managing administrative responsibilities in his capacity as patriarch. Anyone who saw him fight knew that his swordplay exerted an awe-inspiring exhilaration and aggressive aura that could strike the heavens. While not necessarily the most powerful among those nearing apotheosis, he was not one to be trifled with.

Now, as swords of golden light pierced the clouds, the Hua disciples heard a metallic cry ring through all of Peach Blossom Isle. Hua Zhaoting had drawn his sword!

All at once, the disciples were filled with excitement. Everyone who had witnessed his attack at Twilight Fen vividly remembered the breathtaking talent Hua Zhaoting had displayed once he'd unsheathed his sword, the momentum of his strikes seeming to pierce the sun. How fortunate they were to see it once more! With synchronized turns of their wrists, nearly one thousand Hua disciples sharply changed direction to bring forth a million flying swords. Alongside Hua Zhaoting, their swords pointed toward the greatsword of golden light falling from the sky.

As soon as their flying swords turned, however, the disciples got a

look at Hua Zhaoting's sword. Their faces darkened. The radiant sword aura that once encircled his blade was nowhere to be seen. In its place, a tangle of red silk resembling a spiderweb unfurled from hilt to tip, overspreading the entire sword. Those nearest to it smelled the cloying, coppery scent of blood.

The instant Hua Zhaoting drew his sword, the husks, severed heads, and limbs of fiends littered throughout the courtyard began to stir.

Storms surged in the disciples' hearts. *Something's not right. Not right at all! Something is wrong with that sword!*

And then another idea flashed through their minds. *What if the sword isn't what's wrong? What if the patriarch leading us on this fiend-hunt was actually drawn here just like the other buried fiends and the doctor?*

For the past twenty-five years, every disciple on Peach Blossom Isle was required to visit the Hall of Punishments twice a day, morning and night, so that no fiend-possessed husk could hide among them. Even the elder of the Hall of Punishments was not exempt. This was the patriarch's order, and only two people had never been inspected: One was Yi Wusheng, who was in ill health and often in isolation. The other was patriarch Hua Zhaoting himself.

The disciples felt a prickling sensation in their scalps.

Yet if they wanted to do something, it was already too late. They only had time to raise their faces to the sky. Before their million flying swords could approach the golden light, they were instantly pulverized, reduced to powder that vanished like smoke in thin air. Trembling all over as though struck on the crowns of their heads, the disciples felt their fingers—still wrapped around their scabbards—go numb. Countless metallic clangs rang out as nearly a thousand disciples lost their enchanted weapons at once.

They could only stare wide-eyed as Hua Zhaoting's blood sword, enveloped in coiling infernal energy, curved toward the sky. The patriarch's sword aura soared up to clash head-on with the arcing sword of golden light.

Clang!

The harsh scream of metal on metal exploded in the air. Radiance filled the disciples' vision, so dazzling they had to close their eyes. Next, they heard something that sounded like a gong. Struggling to open their

eyes, they saw the greatsword of golden light relentlessly pushing down against the tip of Hua Zhaoting's sword. The shining greatsword's vigor and strength were not diminished in the slightest.

Hua Zhaoting was shaken to his core. He had never once anticipated the existence of a sword strike he could not thwart, and his expression curdled like spoiled milk.

Shortly thereafter, he discovered that this strike was so much more than an attack he could not repel. Under the edge of this giant broadsword of golden light, his own sword aura was as good as nonexistent. Cracks appeared along the length of his blade, and as the greatsword continued down, his sword crumbled in its wake. When Hua Zhaoting finally let go, his hilt fell to the ground. His feet dug into the stony earth as he was pushed back forty feet. When he opened his mouth, a spurt of thick, black blood gushed forth.

Among the thousand people present, not one had foreseen this. Astonishment was written across their faces. The storm in the oceans of their hearts raged like a typhoon.

"Who on earth is in the Phoenix Court?!"

They were all wondering, but what they *should* have wondered was who the two guests who disappeared from their guest rooms in the middle of the night could possibly be. Between Mr. Cheng and his puppet, one had to be a fiend in a human husk; only a fiend could lure every living or dead fiend on Peach Blossom Isle to come pay homage. But if neither Yi Wusheng nor patriarch Hua Zhaoting could resist him…

Following that line of thought to its conclusion was truly unsettling. Each disciple recalled the rumor that had been circulating since dawn: The Northern Domain of Tealspire had collapsed, and the greater archfiend Wu Xingxue might not only still be alive—he might already have escaped!

In a split second of meeting one another's eyes, countless possibilities crossed the disciples' minds, leaving their faces drained of blood.

A moment later, they were dumbfounded yet again. Having shattered Hua Zhaoting's sword, the greatsword of golden light smashed into the ground and wedged deeply into the stone. There it shook, buzzing with residual power. As the golden glow faded, the word on the phantom sword became plainly visible to all: *Mian*.

His counterattack having failed, Hua Zhaoting turned and transformed into a black shadow while everyone else was still in shock. He faded into the night. The golden sword's domineering aura had wounded his mind and soul. Almost by instinct, he returned to his residence in the Hall of Pruning.

As soon as he materialized there, another golden phantom sword shot through the back of his shoulder and pinned him to the floor.

The sword's aura was too sharp and carried enough force with it to wreck the room, overturning chairs and tables, breaking the bed, and rupturing several planters along the wall. Chaos greeted Wu Xingxue and the others when they pursued Hua Zhaoting into the house.

Yi Wusheng took broad strides to Hua Zhaoting's side, the paper

still gripped between his fingers. His hands shook minutely as he reached out. “He—”

Before he could touch Hua Zhaoting’s forehead to examine his soul, a deep voice interrupted.

“He’s not dead.”

Yi Wusheng turned to see Xiao Fuxuan enter the room.

Although Yi Wusheng had been too far away to see the greatsword plummet thunderously to the ground, he’d been standing right next to Xiao Fuxuan.

“You absolutely mustn’t!” he’d yelled, but when he’d seen the word branded on Xiao Fuxuan’s sword hilt, his last word had stopped in his throat. He then noticed that *Mian* also appeared on the corner of the paper he held, as though pressed there by a clean seal. It was impossible to tell that it was there without close inspection.

Yi Wusheng fell silent. He pinched the slip of paper and turned a bewildered stare toward the man who’d just drawn his sword.

“What is your honorable surname?” Yi Wusheng asked after a long pause.

Beside him, Mr. Cheng gave a short laugh. Yi Wusheng wondered what about his question was so funny. The warrior wielding the Sword of Absolution cast a look toward Mr. Cheng, then turned to Yi Wusheng.

“Xiao.” His lips barely moved as he replied.

Well. All right then.

After hearing the name *Xiao*, Yi Wusheng—whose mouth was tightly sealed—did not make a sound until they pursued Hua Zhaoting to the Hall of Pruning and saw him fall to the floor.

To say he felt nothing would have been a lie. The Hua Clan had initiated Yi Wusheng at fourteen. That was when he first met a seventeen-year-old Hua Zhaoting and eleven-year-old Hua Zhaotai. A century had passed since the day he entered the same hall as the Hua siblings to begin studying and cultivating alongside them, getting to know them and eventually becoming their friend. For an ordinary person, a hundred years was more than enough for a proper lifetime.

In the Hua Clan’s Hall of Disciples, he so frequently stayed up late researching alchemical elixirs that he used to nod off in class, cradling

his chin in one palm while the teacher lectured on about the way of the sword and the heart of swordplay, only to be awoken by the Hua siblings poking him from their seats behind his.

Though it had been a hundred years, it seemed like only yesterday that he'd last startled awake at their touch.

Twenty-five years had passed since they buried Hua Zhaotai, the young lady who loved to laugh, beneath the peach forest. Her brother, Hua Zhaoting, who as a young man found following the rules terribly irksome, had become the Hua Clan's strictest ruler. Now, he lay at Yi Wusheng's feet, broken and brought low by the affliction they shared, his soul devoured by a fiend.

That was why, more than anything else, he wanted to know if the man before him was dead—whether he possessed a soul remnant or not.

"I didn't kill him," Xiao Fuxuan said without inflection. "I'm restraining the fiend by force so it can't fight back."

Yi Wusheng nodded. "That's good. That's good," he repeated quietly.

Despite an overwhelming sense of dread, he touched his fingers to Hua Zhaoting's forehead. Hua Zhaoting's condition was even worse than his own. It was almost impossible to sense any sign of a soul remnant.

Wu Xingxue stood nearby and watched silently for a time. Hua Zhaoting's fingers clawed at the floor, but his eyes were locked on something. It was said that those teetering on the edge of death often unwittingly revealed secrets. They might glance toward a hidden cache or at someone burdened with unspoken knowledge. Fiends were no exception, and at that moment, Hua Zhaoting stared directly at the planter he'd stood next to and examined for a period of time each day.

The planters held several special and meticulously cared for dwarf peach trees. It was midwinter, but their plump branches and green leaves showed no sign of decay; one even had a fresh flower bud.

When the planters shattered, the little dwarf trees had toppled, scattering wet compost and roots across the floor and exposing gravel beneath the soil.

Why would anyone use gravel to grow peach trees like these? Wu Xingxue wondered. He walked to the planter, lifted the hem of his

robes, and squatted down to dig his fingers into the gravel. He turned the rocks over until his index finger pushed a shard of pottery out of the way, sending it clanging to the floor.

Xiao Fuxuan's voice came from above. "What are you looking for?" Wu Xingxue glanced at him before returning to the gravel.

"Didn't you say that you were looking for something? Something that someone took away and later brought back?" He stood, brushed the sand and soil from his fingers, and wiped his hands with a clean cloth from the wooden rack nearby. "I noticed he kept looking over here, so I figured I might as well check the soil for you and see if anything's there."

On hearing these words, Yi Wusheng came over. With the hand not occupied with the piece of paper, he turned over the gravel several times. Suddenly, he hesitated before digging more urgently. Mixed into the gravel of one of the planters were odd knickknacks—wooden combs, disciple-identification tablets, hair bands, and the fish-embroidered pouches the Hua Clan used to send orders. There were many items, each different from the next, and judging from their age and condition, the items did not belong to the same person. But Hua Zhaoting had buried all of them here, for some reason.

Wu Xingxue took an identification tablet and gave it a quick scan. "Who were these people?"

Yi Wusheng was frozen in shock, and a long time passed before he replied, "Disciples."

The objects were all accoutrements that disciples typically carried, so frequently lost that their owners would hardly find it odd if one went missing.

The words of the disciple who greeted them at the guest house flashed through Wu Xingxue's mind.

Though the disciples visited the Hall of Punishments twice a day to prevent fiend possession, some lost their lives each month regardless. From the looks of it, they now knew how those disciples had died.

Yet there was a real contradiction here. He thought again of the rumors he'd heard in Spring Pennant before coming to the Hua estate. They said the Hua Clan alone guarded the lake, occupying Peach Blossom Isle and forbidding commoners from settling there. They said Peach Blossom Isle's treacherous terrain made it easy for fiends to

invade, and any commoners living there would be like meat on a cutting board, their chances of survival slim. When he'd heard these rumors, he'd wondered why the Hua Clan—the largest clan in Spring Pennant, with so many disciples—couldn't find some way to keep the commoners safe, assuming they settled in a suitable spot. After all, every clan but the Hua Clan managed to do so.

In hindsight, it really was strange. On the one hand, it appeared that Hua Zhaoting couldn't help devouring disciples to fill his stomach. On the other, he seemed terrified of living near commoners.

Holding an old identification tablet in one hand, Wu Xingxue stared ahead, lost in thought.

Moments later, Yi Wusheng exclaimed softly. From a different planter, he dug out a flat-topped jar with small holes in the lid. He opened it to find it was filled with pills. They had been buried for an unknowable amount of time but were still veiled in a luminous, ethereal glow, indicating they were well protected.

Yi Wusheng swallowed. "Dreamsbane…"

No wonder Hua Zhaoting watered this planter every day. Theoretically, even a special blossoming peach tree shouldn't have been cared for like this—unless he was subconsciously tending to something else he thought useful.

Oh. Dreamsbane… The same Dreamsbane that he could have taken to save himself, if he'd only taken it within a month of being marked.

How long did it take Hua Zhaoting to realize a fiend had possessed him? Did he try swallowing mouthfuls of Dreamsbane the way I did? Did he try to fight it too? Was he lucid when he issued the order forbidding disciples from coming close to the Hall of Pruning? Was there any remnant of his soul left on the night I stumbled over to see him?

The chill running through Yi Wusheng's body only grew colder the longer he thought it over. The planter shards had cut his finger, but he no longer bled. The pale, raw wound looked rather alarming, but he paid it no heed and started to dig through the last planter. This time, he found a small box.

The moment Yi Wusheng opened the box, Xiao Fuxuan sensed a hint of residual celestial energy and pivoted. He saw a round divot in the box holding a tiny white-jade bell inlaid with silver filigree. Unless he was mistaken, he knew what it was: a Dreambell. Shaken nine times

in nine different directions, it could give someone a protracted dream.

Chapter 13:
Soul Examination

WU XINGXUE'S GAZE fell on the box. He pondered it for a while, then said, "Hey, that's…"

Yi Wusheng paused for a moment. "Oh, yes, it's a Dreambell."

Dreambells were not rare items in the mortal realm. There once was a vibrant bazaar in the southwest region that opened annually on the third day of the Third Month. Its strings of lanterns stretched on for four miles, illuminating the surrounding mountains. On first impression, the bazaar made it seem as though heavenly fire had fallen into the mortal realm, and each time it landed, it would burn for three days and nights.

The mountain range was called Blossomfell Terrace, and the bazaar was known as the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar. All kinds of strange and fantastical trinkets were sold there, including the original Dreambells. Cute little trinkets, Dreambells were no more than good luck charms—wearing one allegedly ensured well-being and repelled fiends, while hanging one near a bedroom window brought a peaceful night's sleep and sweet dreams. They briefly became popular in Reverie and Lang Province. Later, when the bazaar was no more and Blossomfell Terrace became the entrance to the fiends' lair, Nightgleam, Dreambells fell out of popular usage. After several rounds through the rumor mill, its supposed purpose changed from giving a good night's sleep to weaving dreams.

But the Hua Clan's Dreambell was different. It was no mere mundane object from a bazaar, but a celestial relic that could push someone from wakefulness into dreams. Allegedly, once the Dreambell sent a person into a dream, their memories would burn to ash, and the dreamer could not easily wake unless the Dreambell was used to rouse them. Hua Zhaoting had tried to ring it but eventually gave up; no matter how much thaumaturgy he poured into it, the Dreambell's tongue remained still. Fearing the relic might fall into a fiend's hands, he'd carefully hidden it away.

Now, even Hua Zhaoting himself had become a fiend.

Then, this relic… Yi Wusheng hesitated for a moment, then picked up the Dreambell and gave it a tentative shake.

Ding! Ding!

The bell rang twice.

Well, that's outrageous. With a simple shake of his fingers, Yi Wusheng had accomplished what Hua Zhaoting had been unable to, even with all his power. Surely it couldn't be that the Dreambell sensed he was a good person and decided to cut him some slack—could it? If not, there was only one explanation left: The Dreambell in this box was a counterfeit. Yi Wusheng trembled so hard the paper in his fingers shook.

"The Dreambell—it's been swapped with a fake!"

Who could have done this? And when? Yi Wusheng tried to remember, but he'd spent the past twenty-odd years wandering aimlessly in a fog, not much different from a dead man. His memories were a tangled mess, and his thoughts were mostly unhinged ravings.

He hammered a closed fist against his open palm. "Could it be… Wu Xingxue?!"

Having said this, Yi Wusheng raised his head to find Mr. Cheng staring at him in a very odd way. Yi Wusheng wondered what he might have said wrong. Try as he might, he could not assemble a complete picture from the fragmented images of what happened twenty-five years ago.

"Actually," he murmured in a meandering way, "we lost this Dreambell once, when Wu Xingxue came to Peach Blossom Isle. Somehow, it came back again. Could that be…when Wu Xingxue switched them?" His voice grew weaker and weaker under Mr. Cheng's intent gaze.

Mr. Cheng suddenly grinned. "How come I can't hear you anymore? Has the paper stopped working?"

Yi Wusheng did not reply. He had no idea who on earth this Mr. Cheng actually was. His mind had been very hazy earlier. All he remembered was wanting to beg someone to grant him death and deliverance. In his confusion, the one he grabbed was this young nobleman. At the time, Yi Wusheng was just able to discern an invisible, oppressive force radiating from Mr. Cheng, though it seemed to be gone

now—elusive and unfathomable as a foggy night. No matter what, he had to be someone of no small significance to be in the company of Xiao Mian, the Tianxiu Immortal. Perhaps he was once an Immortal himself.

Yi Wusheng again looked down at the treasure box in his hands, his mind ablaze with speculation.

"No, that's still not right," he continued. "Wu Xingxue was infamous for his perverse behavior. Knowing him, if he was the one who took the relic, that would've been it. If he didn't want to return it, then he simply wouldn't have. He wouldn't have gone to such great lengths to hide what he'd done."

As Yi Wusheng mumbled, things gradually started to make sense. "So, when this Dreambell was found again, it was still the real one. But sometime between then and now, it was swapped with a fake one."

And between then and now, Hua Zhaoting had no one by his side. He—or one might say, the fiend inside his body—was the only person who had access to the Dreambell. In other words, the one who was after the Dreambell was the genesis of the curse that had turned them into fiends.

Yi Wusheng reached up and touched the back of his neck. The scar was still there, along with the marking that resembled a puppet rune. His symptoms were identical to those seen in people who emerged afflicted from the Valley of Laments all those years ago. But the entire affair was bizarre, because he had never gone to the Valley of Laments. He wasn't the only one; Yi Wuqi and Hua Zhaoting hadn't gone either. How did they all get marked?

Without warning, Yi Wusheng bowed deeply to Xiao Fuxuan. "If I may be so bold as to ask, Lord Immortal, how many more days will this soul remnant of mine last?"

"It's hard to say," Xiao Fuxuan replied. "Three to five days, perhaps—ten days at most."

"That's good. That's good."

"What is it?"

"I would like to go to the Valley of Laments," Yi Wusheng quietly replied. "I can't figure out why the Hua Clan ended up like this, and I don't want to carry my ignorance with me into the netherworld. When I

watched over Peach Blossom Isle, I had a thousand things to worry about. Now that this one last breath is all I have left either way, I realize there's nothing to be afraid of. Why not go to the Valley of Laments, the source of all this, and see what I can learn? First, I wish to uncover the origin of the Hua Clan's problems. That way, when I die and see my old friends again, I can give them an explanation. I can't bear the thought of them becoming revenants.

"Second, I would also like to track down the real Dreambell."

When he mentioned tracking down the true Dreambell, both Xiao Fuxuan and Mr. Cheng looked up.

A moment later, a nodding Mr. Cheng acknowledged his words. "Ah."

After a heart-stopping night on Peach Blossom Isle, the disciples needed a great deal of comforting before they calmed down. Once Xiao Fuxuan retrieved his sword, Yi Wusheng picked Hua Zhaoting up from the floor and brought him to the Hall of Suppression, where he summoned the other three elders and gave a rough account of what had happened. He left everything in their care, then asked for a free carriage from the stables the next day, bundled up two jars of elixir pills for the road, and strapped on his sword. Before leaving, he said his goodbyes to Xiao Fuxuan and Mr. Cheng, thanking them every which way for almost two hours straight.

A considerable time later, Yi Wusheng was inside a carriage on its way to Valley of Laments, holding two medicine jars and a sword in his arms. He silently faced the two people he'd just bid farewell to for multiple hours.

He could not think of a single thing to say.

The two-hour goodbye really had all been for naught, he supposed.

This was a Hua custom-built carriage, tall and spacious. Even the horses were enchanted; raised on an elixir, the steeds could traverse and accurately navigate mountains. No whips were required to drive them, and they galloped at a smooth and steady pace.

It should have been a comfortable ride. However, with Mr. Cheng

across the table and the honorable, sword-bearing Xiao Fuxuan—who seemed to disdain sitting—standing up against the door to the carriage, escape was impossible. Crammed between the two of them, Yi Wusheng felt suffocated.

Not that Yi Wusheng had any plans to escape! He simply found the charged atmosphere inside the carriage a bit difficult to describe. A mere soul remnant such as himself could hardly bear the looming pressure of the two great mountains with whom he traveled.

Besides, he was quite puzzled. Why were they accompanying him to the Valley of Laments? It couldn't have been out of concern for the Hua Clan. Since they had no other business in the valley, it could only be about the Dreambell…

Yi Wusheng glanced at a box on one side of the table. He'd brought the fake Dreambell along just in case he needed it. What little celestial energy remained had already dissipated, and the box was otherwise unremarkable. He wondered what sound the real Dreambell made when shaken and what it felt like for the one who drifted off into its dream. Yi Wusheng attempted to set his mind free to wander, but it refused to go far off.

He finally could not resist breaking the carriage's strange silence.

"Um…"

Mr. Cheng, his chin resting in one hand over his propped-up elbow, raised his gaze to Yi Wusheng. Xiao Fuxuan, staring out the window with his arms around his sword, also turned to face him. Yi Wusheng searched his brain and dug up a suitable topic.

"Um, I believe Lord Immortal asked me earlier if I can still perform somniamancy?"

At these words, Mr. Cheng straightened a bit and stopped looking so sluggish, though he still leaned on his hand. His pitch-black pupils glanced Xiao Fuxuan's way.

With regret written across his face, Yi Wusheng rubbed his fingers on the paper that allowed him to speak and continued with a sincere apology. "I'm sorry for neglecting the matter for so long. I was so occupied taking care of the odds and ends within the clan that it slipped my mind."

He'd seized on a topic that livened up the atmosphere inside the

carriage a little, and he wasn't about to give it up. He didn't catch the subtle changes in his fellow passengers' demeanors in response to his words. Had he noticed it, he might have opted to keep quiet. Unfortunately, not only did he make some ill-advised noise, he went on.

"I heard from the clan disciples that this is why you came to Peach Blossom Isle, Mr. Cheng. They say you're a living soul who blundered into another's body?"

For a split second, Mr. Cheng looked pained, but the expression soon disappeared. The change was so fast that Yi Wusheng assumed he was mistaken.

"Mm-hmm," Mr. Cheng said. "It's pretty much just as you said, Doctor."

"I see." Yi Wusheng nodded. "That is quite a predicament indeed. If a living soul occupies the wrong shell for too long, it's bad for both of them. We should send you back to your own body as soon as possible. Though it's rare, I have seen it before, so I can offer some help."

"Is that so? What do you need me to do?"

Yi Wusheng tapped a finger on the table. "Please put your wrist on the table, inside facing up."

"All right." Mr. Cheng seemed quite agreeable.

"Excuse me," muttered Yi Wusheng, who proceeded to put his finger on the other man's wrist.

Xiao Fuxuan's sword flickered in Yi Wusheng's peripheral vision. The immortal's gaze seemed to have landed on Yi Wusheng's finger as if he, too, was waiting for answers.

Yi Wusheng continued his examination. "Where did you come from, sir?"

"Magpie Haven."

"Magpie Haven? Magpie Haven…" Yi Wusheng muttered. "I've never heard of such a place. Must not be of this world. Is it a nice place to live?" he asked in passing, perhaps from his doctor's instinct to ease his patient's anxiety.

Mr. Cheng smiled. His eyes were downcast and difficult to read, but his words were measured, unhurried, as though he was not eager to finish reminiscing. "It's not bad at all. There are always lots of people

coming and going in my estate. The city itself is vibrant too. There are bazaars in both the eastern and western quadrants. We have the Banquet of the Winding Wine each spring and a large-scale hundred-man hunting expedition every winter."

Wu Xingxue kept talking, and Yi Wusheng kept probing. Before long, the doctor's eyebrows began to draw together. He subconsciously shot a glance at the purse-lipped Xiao Fuxuan. His mind was unfathomable, and his dark-eyed gaze never left Mr. Cheng.

"Sounds like a pleasant place," Yi Wusheng said. "By the way, what is your name, sir?"

This time, though he waited for a while, the answer never came. There was only silence within the carriage. The mountain paths stretched on, and the rhythmic, unrelenting clip-clop of hooves rendered the quiet ever more unsettling. Yi Wusheng looked up with a frown to meet Mr. Cheng's jet-black eyes.

As the Hua Clan's elder of the fourth hall, he'd met many people before. Still, it had been a long time since his heart felt such a jolt from meeting someone's eyes. The feeling came on in an instant but departed just as quickly when Mr. Cheng withdrew his gaze, looking gentle and harmless once more. He seemed to be trying to remember his name.

Yi Wusheng's finger twitched. Honestly, it no longer mattered whether Mr. Cheng told him. As Mr. Cheng had spoken of Magpie Haven, Yi Wusheng had made his diagnosis: There was nothing to indicate that this young man's soul was separated from his body. The shell and the spirit inside were a perfect match, showing no hint of tampering. Mr. Cheng was simply himself.

"Sir…" Yi Wusheng paused. He thought it over and decided it was his duty as a physician to tell Mr. Cheng the whole truth. Though it might cause Mr. Cheng a moment's embarrassment, it was better than letting him confuse his dreams with reality.

"Actually…" began Yi Wusheng, about to explain everything, when he felt a tap at his waist. For those who studied swordplay, there was nothing quite as recognizable as the feel of a sword. He could tell it was the tip of Xiao Fuxuan's scabbard. The next second, he heard Xiao Fuxuan's voice transmitted through the scabbard, as though he wished for only Yi Wusheng to hear.

"Swallow it," said Xiao Fuxuan in a low tone. "Say something

else."

Yi Wusheng trailed off into baffled silence. He had no idea why he couldn't simply tell Mr. Cheng the truth, nor what the Tianxiu Immortal meant by this. But Xiao Fuxuan had spoken, and Yi Wusheng didn't want to make things difficult for himself. He'd certainly met others like Xiao Fuxuan before, typically relatives of the dreamer who worried that shattering the dream might bring sorrow to the dreamer. They chose to protect them instead. From its description, Magpie Haven sounded like a halcyon place. At the very least, it sounded much better than the world they currently lived in.

As ordered, Yi Wusheng swallowed his words. "Actually, your situation is easy enough to resolve. Give me a few days, sir, and I can send you back."

He didn't have that many days left to live anyway. He raised his eyes to find Mr. Cheng looking at him as though surprised by his answer. He glanced toward Xiao Fuxuan's sword before looking back at Yi Wusheng, then tipped his head to one side and smiled.

"Well, thank you for going to all this trouble for me, Doctor."

Yi Wusheng gave a half-hearted acknowledgment. He withdrew his hand and resumed leaning against the wall of the carriage, hugging his medicine jars. While he was deep in his thoughts, wondering why any of this was happening, he heard Mr. Cheng speak again.

"Xiao Fuxuan."

Their eyes met and the two fell unaccountably quiet for a beat, then Mr. Cheng touched his face.

"We've been away from Spring Pennant long enough. Can you remove this glamour now? My face feels uncomfortable."

Yi Wusheng did not show much of a reaction. He'd long since caught on to the glamour; for one thing, the Tianxiu Immortal looked nothing like himself. Due to his upbringing, Yi Wusheng asked no probing questions. He watched as Xiao Fuxuan lifted two of his fingers.

The glamour vanished, gradually revealing Mr. Cheng's true appearance. The face of the man across the table was known to all, striking and unforgettable.

It was Wu Xingxue.

Yi Wusheng said nothing and leaned slowly back against his seat.

Whatever scraps of soul he had left within him were having a breakdown.

He recalled how Wu Xingxue had eyed him but did not speak a word when Yi Wusheng asked his name; that look had said he knew very well what his name was. He broke into a cold sweat as he remembered a few minutes earlier. He had quite nearly exposed him by saying: *This isn't a case of a living soul possessing another body. You are the rightful owner of this body.*

It was downright terrifying in hindsight. Yi Wusheng closed his eyes, not daring to move or speak, and stewed in silence.

Eventually, a thought sprang up like the undead in his mind. *Wait a second!*

Why was Wu Xingxue, an archfiend despised in all corners of the earth, traveling with the Tianxiu Immortal Xiao Fuxuan? And why had the illustrious immortal refused to let Yi Wusheng diagnose Wu Xingxue aloud, knowing full well that the archfiend was indeed himself?

Why on earth would Xiao Fuxuan want to keep up this act?

Chapter 14:
Clear as a Mirror

As the carriage passed through Spring Pennant, snow began to fall and drift into the cabin. With a flick of his sword hilt, Xiao Fuxuan closed the curtain. The curtain was attached to a thick wool blanket that blocked the paltry daylight, so the cabin dimmed. The Hua carriage had everything they needed, from the knitted blankets folded neatly on the seats to hot-water bottles and elixir-infused incense.

Wu Xingxue leaned against one wall, the hand-warming stove he'd brought from the boat in his sleeve. He was quite fond of warm, dim places like this; they made him feel sleepy and relaxed. He wrapped himself around the hand-warming stove as though he intended to sleep for a while, but his eyes were only half closed. His drowsy gaze fell on the tall figure next to the door.

Yi Wusheng was right—Wu Xingxue knew who he was. The first time it had dawned on Wu Xingxue that he wasn't quite right was on Peach Blossom Isle when Ayao barged into the room yelling and thrashing, trying to grab him. In that split second, though Xiao Fuxuan thwarted Ayao's advance, Wu Xingxue saw Ayao's eyes. A madman's gaze was always confused and unfocused, but a vivid image arose in Wu Xingxue's mind of Ayao's eyes, wide with fear, staring at him through the gap in a window lattice. It felt as though he'd seen these eyes before, so he asked the disciple who greeted them who the man was.

The disciple had told him Ayao's name. And what was the cause of his madness?

"The greater archfiend Wu Xingxue."

It was impossible to articulate how he felt in that instant. He only remembered falling quiet before subconsciously darting his eyes to Xiao Fuxuan. He could not articulate *why* he turned to Xiao Fuxuan. Was he hoping someone could assure him he wasn't the archfiend Wu Xingxue? That the memory was nothing more than a remnant of the original owner's spiritual core?

Perhaps he merely wanted to know how Xiao Fuxuan would react if he really *were* Wu Xingxue.

An elder from Magpie Haven whose name he could not recall had once described him as a precocious child whose face never betrayed his emotions. Sometimes he wished he was far less observant than he actually was.

In the Hua Clan's guest room, the initiate in charge of hospitality had held up a soul-integrity talisman to assess him. With so much speculation occupying his mind, he'd barely been paying attention, yet he automatically moved to switch hands. He had no idea why he'd switched hands, nor what might've happened when he did. Everything just happened as if by muscle memory, like this was how he always handled such situations. He had no excuse for the action and therefore resorted to teasing the disciple. He'd been preoccupied ever since.

Inside, he told himself that the flash of memory really *was* just a lingering remnant of the owner. Aloud, however, he asked Xiao Fuxuan exactly what sort of a person Wu Xingxue was. In reality, he had a pretty good idea of the answer to that question. He simply had yet to acknowledge it—until he saw Yi Wusheng clinging to the hems of his robes and begging him for death just as Yi Wuqi once had.

And until he saw the Dreambell in its box. Staring at it, he finally acknowledged that there was no such place as Magpie Haven in this world. From the moment he sent his vital force across the room to pick up Ayao, using his hand to draw Yi Wusheng's sword and thrust it cleanly into Yi Wusheng's heart, he knew. He and Wu Xingxue were one and the same.

Magpie Haven—its unceasing procession of carriages and horses, the rhythmic hoofbeats on spacious highways, the commoners jostling on their daily business, all those Banquets of the Winding Wine, the midwinter hunting expeditions, his estate with its birds perched on flower-guarding bells—was nothing more than a fabricated dream. He'd idled away twenty-five years in this fantasy before finally opening his eyes.

Yet he still couldn't remember anything. His only vague memory was of hearing the chiming of a bell. Who rang the bell? Why did he sleep for twenty-five years? What happened before the bell chimed, and what was he supposed to do now that he was awake? These were questions he could not answer, and in all likelihood, he would have to find the Dreambell to unravel the dream. This was why he'd boarded Yi Wusheng's carriage. What was curious to him was why Xiao Fuxuan had

joined him.

Wu Xingxue understood Xiao Fuxuan's every action and reaction other than this one. After all, Wu Xingxue was the one who insisted he was possessed, lying so ably that he'd convinced himself. Despite his status as an immortal and the certainty of Wu Xingxue's words, Xiao Fuxuan must have maintained some level of doubt. That alone meant he could not act unreasonably and handle a mere mortal the way he would an archfiend. All things considered, it was not extraordinary that his attitude was vague and difficult to read.

Now, things were different. Wu Xingxue knew everything, and judging by Yi Wusheng's reaction earlier, Xiao Fuxuan probably did as well. But if he knew, why did he stop Yi Wusheng from exposing Wu Xingxue? Was he trying to protect Yi Wusheng, or was he worried that exposing the archfiend would cause Wu Xingxue to flee, never to be caught again, no matter what Xiao Fuxuan wanted?

Perhaps…or perhaps there was another explanation.

Wu Xingxue hugged the hand-warming stove and watched Xiao Fuxuan under the cover of gloom. He stroked the edge of the stove and rubbed his warmed fingertips, trying to circulate the disorderly vital forces within him. In the low light, the spacious cabin felt cramped, and even the slightest movement was easily audible. As he curled his fingers, the light clink of gossamer metal sounded inside the cabin.

Across from Wu Xingxue, Yi Wusheng tensed and jerked upright, the paper between his fingers rustling. "What was that?"

Wu Xingxue hummed to himself, then said, "Xiao Fuxuan."

The tall figure by the door shifted. His low, dark voice rang out. "Speak."

"Can we undo these chains?"

Yi Wusheng froze before inching back into the furniture. Xiao Fuxuan looked on without a word.

I might as well die now, thought Yi Wusheng. He'd almost blurted out, *Chains? I don't see any chains.* Fortunately, he caught himself. The chains were no doubt the heavenly chains used to restrain archfiends in the Northern Domain of Tealspire, condemning the wicked on heaven's behalf.

Allegedly, these chains were nailed into an archfiend one at a

time, one chain for each crime. Ordinary people could hear but not see them. Archfiends were said to atone for their crimes with their own blood, flesh, lifespan, and soul. For every crime atoned for, one chain would fall. Unsurprisingly, none of the archfiends bound in heavenly chains had ever lived long enough to shed their bindings before their bodies turned to ash and their souls faded to nothingness. Wu Xingxue was probably the first to dare ask if his chains could be undone, especially in the same unremarkable tone he might use to ask, *I'm hungry, got a snack?*

Ordinarily, Wu Xingxue's request would have been rejected out of hand. However, Yi Wusheng did not hear an answer from Xiao Fuxuan. The doctor could not resist opening his eyes a smidgen to steal a glance at the Tianxiu Immortal who ruled over Tealspire.

You'd dare to undo those? Yi Wusheng thought.

The darkness inside the cabin made Xiao Fuxuan's silhouette blurry and hard to discern. Wu Xingxue sensed him casting a glance in his direction. Everyone said that *no one* could see his chains, but Wu Xingxue suspected Xiao Fuxuan could; his gaze seemed to sweep from one to another. Still, because it was so dim inside the cabin, he couldn't read Xiao Fuxuan's expression. He could only listen and wait for Xiao Fuxuan to break his long silence.

"They can't be undone." Xiao Fuxuan's voice remained low but sounded somehow less cold.

Wu Xingxue nodded, shifting. Again came the sound of rustling chains.

"Oh, is that so?" he murmured indistinctly. "Well, forget it." Though he still caressed the hand-warming stove, the forces inside his body did not circulate smoothly. They might not have awakened yet because it had been so long since he'd used them. After a while, he shifted inconspicuously again.

"Does it hurt a lot?" Xiao Fuxuan asked.

"No…it doesn't."

"Then why do you keep moving?"

Wu Xingxue stared at the silhouette. "I understand that you knew I was moving earlier because the chains rattled, but there was no noise just now. How did you know?"

“I can still hear them.”

“Oh.”

Throughout this exchange, Yi Wusheng remained silent. Nevertheless, he was quite at the end of his rope. *What sort of bizarre conversation between an archfiend and an immortal is this?*

He considered playing dead to the bitter end, but the archfiend spoke again—to him this time.

“How much farther must we go before we reach the Valley of Laments?”

At a gentle prod from Xiao Fuxuan’s sword, Yi Wusheng could play dead no longer. Resigned to his fate, he opened his eyes. Immortals seldom traveled the mortal realm by carriage, so Xiao Fuxuan could not answer the question.

“Very far,” said Yi Wusheng. “After the incidents in the valley, cultivation clans set down restrictive wards along the way. It would take a whole month to get there in a commoner’s carriage. The Hua Clan’s enchanted steeds can read sigils and detour around some of the wards, so we can probably get there in three days.”

Yi Wusheng couldn’t bear another moment in the darkness under the stares of an archfiend and an immortal. He raised his hand to touch a golden rope on the wall, causing a single bead of light to illuminate the cabin.

Every lamp in a Hua carriage was custom-made, and the lamp oil was infused with crushed elixir pills and medicinal powders. Not only were the lamps wind proof, they were warded against certain lesser ghosts and fiends. There were myriad forms of life, and ordinary people feared many of them.

At present, fiends caused the most disturbance. They existed because people had cultivated on the infernal path, so fiends originated from life. Ghouls, meanwhile, originated from the spirits of the dead. While fiends congregated in Nightgleam, ghouls preferred desolate, inhospitable places densely populated with untended graves. Travelers often encountered ghouls en route to the Valley of Laments. Some of the ghouls had gone hungry for so long that they could smell the living from ten miles away. To get a taste, they stealthily attached to the backs of those traveling on foot or the roofs and undersides of carriages. The Valley of Laments once served as a necessary thoroughfare between

several major cities. The cultivation clan disciples who traveled to the Boundless Sea every ten days to collect spirit stones also passed through the valley. Cultivation clans thus supplied their carriages with several of these specially made spirit-warding lamps for protection from ghouls.

Yi Wusheng had turned on the lamp out of habit. As soon as it lit up, Wu Xingxue averted his face, eyes narrowed as though he disliked this light. It occurred to Yi Wusheng that the lamp was designed to ward off ghouls and fiends—and the fiends' very own ringleader was right across the table from him. Yi Wusheng's fingers froze in midair. Unsure whether he should begin begging for help, he looked to the Tianxiu Immortal.

Xiao Fuxuan frowned and examined the colored-glass lampshade on the wall. The words *Corruption Ward* were written on the lampshade. His gaze swept over those words, and he looked away without much of an expression. In the next instant, the lamp went out with a soft poof.

Beautiful. Darkness returned to the cabin. Yi Wusheng pinched the damned slip of paper, parting and then closing his lips beneath their black cloth covering. In the end, he said nothing and merely brooded over his lot.

Fine. If you want the lights out, we'll put them out, he thought, resigned.

The archfiend seated across from him said nothing, and the cabin was quiet for a long while.

"Doctor, could I trouble you to stop and pick up two people when we pass the city outskirts?" Wu Xingxue said after a time.

No! No trouble at all! How would I ever dare to say it's any trouble? thought Yi Wusheng before he asked, "Who are they?"

"Two people I was traveling with earlier. I guess you could call them household staff."

Household staff? *What kind of people could be employed as Wu Xingxue's household staff?* Yi Wusheng wondered. *I'm sure what he means is he has to stop and pick up a couple of fiendlings.*

While Yi Wusheng felt sorry for himself, Ning Huaishan and One-Arm were crouched on a rock along a mountain path on Spring Pennant's outskirts, their elbows propped on their knees. Not far from

them, a Hua disciple hurried by to stick something on two idols near the city's exit. From a distance, it looked like a notice. The very sight of idols made Ning Huaishan want to retch, so at first, he didn't want to walk over. His curiosity won out, however, so he grabbed One-Arm and shuffled over until they were just close enough to read the text.

The notice was a pageful of officialese, long-winded and grandiose, that could be reduced to the following three sentences: *Two heroes of justice helped our Peach Blossom Isle solve a major problem. The two heroes and Dr. Yi Wusheng, our clan's fourth hall elder, wish to visit the Valley of Laments. They must be allowed to come and go unhindered.*

Two portraits were posted beneath the notice. As already shown in his portrait of Hua Xin, the Hua Clan artist was masterful indeed; the figures depicted were immediately recognizable unless the viewer was blind. Regarding the portrait with an odd stare, Ning Huaishan elbowed One-Arm.

"Those clothes look familiar to you?"

One-Arm looked at the image blankly for a long while, then croaked, "Yeah! That's our archon and his puppet."

Ning Huaishan regarded the words *Heroes of Justice* with an even more confused stare. "Has the Hua Clan gone nuts, or have the two of us gone blind?"

"Hard to say."

At a loss, they stared at each other for ages before One-Arm spoke measuredly. "I meant to say something much earlier, but don't you think there's something wrong with the archon?"

Ning Huaishan did not open his mouth.

"I mean, the more I think about it, the more something feels off," One-Arm pushed. "What do you think?"

After a long, long pause, Ning Huaishan replied. "So?"

"If he really is an imposter, I won't let him off easy. Someone's going to pay for this arm of mine!"

Ning Huaishan thought about it, licked his canines, and waved his hand dramatically. "Just you wait! Once he's out of the city, the two of us are gonna give him a little scare. If he *was* messing with us, we'll make him cry and beg for help."

Chapter 15:
Invocation

As agreed, Ning Huaishan and One-Arm waited beside the mountain path on the city outskirts. From a distance, Yi Wusheng drew the curtain aside and inspected them before they boarded. Thanks to the heavy snow, he could only make out their silhouettes, not their faces. One of the two underlings appeared especially thin and small. At first glance, he looked like a boy of about fourteen.

A little one? Yi Wusheng shook his head, bemoaning the wayward youth to himself. *It's detestable, lamentable how many young ones choose the infernal path nowadays.*

He'd once encountered an adolescent like that and, in a moment of misguided compassion, had not dealt a fatal blow.

"Why are you shaking your head, Doctor?" Wu Xingxue asked. His voice was lovely, and when he spoke this way, he sounded like any wealthy young nobleman—yet it still made Yi Wusheng uneasy. Perhaps the last syllables of his sentences were a shade too soft. Yi Wusheng let the curtain drop. He squeezed the paper between his fingers and was about to reply when someone raised the curtain again, allowing the blizzard to whoosh in.

Ning Huaishan was the first to board. "Archon, we waited for ages!" As soon as he finished greeting Wu Xingxue, he caught sight of Yi Wusheng, and his face turned livid. "What are *you* doing here?!"

Yi Wusheng sat in stunned silence.

"What a reaction," said Wu Xingxue, glancing at them. "You two know each other?"

Ning Huaishan sneered. "How would a Nightgleam resident like me ever meet a gent from some proper clan like his? Only thanks to the lucky stars above was I blessed enough to meet him once, years ago."

Noticing the total lack of recognition on Yi Wusheng's puzzled face, Ning Huaishan grew even more furious. He cursed under his breath and pulled down his collar to reveal a stretch of skin just beneath his throat, right near the jugular.

Yi Wusheng was stunned to see a long sword scar, freshly scabbed as though the wound had recently reopened.

At the sight of it, Yi Wusheng finally recognized him. Staring at Ning Huaishan in obvious shock, he gripped the paper in his hand so tightly it wrinkled; he was just that dumbfounded.

"It's you, isn't it…? The little kid from Twilight Fen?"

"I'm not goddamn *little*," Ning Huaishan said, letting go of his collar. "Sure, I was fourteen the last time we met, but it's been almost forty years since."

Naturally, Wu Xingxue had no clue what the two of them were talking about. It didn't stop him from jumping in to stir things up. "Twilight Fen?"

Ning Huaishan was done yelling and instead laughed icily at Wu Xingxue's question. "Right, Twilight Fen. You remember, Archon. I'd gone on that errand with Mahakala only to find the Hua Clan blocking our way. Mahakala ended up dying on our way back."

Well. Though the archon had no idea, he said, "Ah, yes. I remember what happened with Mahakala." *Yeah, as if!* "Still, what's with the wound?" *You're a fiend already, so shouldn't skirmishes with cultivation clans be an ordinary affair? Why are you so hung up on a little injury after all this time?*

"You should ask him," replied Ning Huaishan, pointing at Yi Wusheng.

Yi Wusheng kept mum. *What a strange bunch of folks I've loaded into this carriage.*

He was quiet another moment but ultimately decided to explain. "The sword that wounded him had some…poison smeared on it."

The Hua Clan had been there that day specifically to slaughter fiends, so everyone's swords had been smeared with alchemical poison. Yi Wusheng had concocted the substance himself. With a single thrust that made even the smallest cut, a treated sword caused an injury that would forever rupture and fester. Residents of Nightgleam practiced sorcery and had their own methods for treating an injury, and though they recovered rapidly, it came at a great cost.

"Thanks to this wound, I've spent the past forty years practicing poison-sealing and soaking in medicinal pools. And I haven't grown an

inch since!" Ning Huaishan said through gritted teeth, staring at Yi Wusheng. "You even dared to lecture me. What was it you said? Oh yeah—you told me that, as someone straying down the infernal path at such a young age, I'd better open my eyes and take a good look at those slaughtered by fiends.

"You said if I continued down this path, I'd regret it for the rest of my days, and asked if I'd ever spared a moment's thought for my family. You have a lot of nerve, old gent," Ning Huaishan laughed, though his canines were bared in a sneer.

Old…gent? Yi Wusheng fell silent. Cultivators aged slowly; an ordinary person who looked the way he did could easily pass for twenty-five.

"All of Nightgleam says I'm an orphan who crawled out of the ground, you know," Ning Huaishan said. "I don't even have some pain-in-the-ass family to miss, so what I am I supposed to do, huh? You, on the other hand, old gent—did you ever expect we'd one day cross paths again?"

Still Yi Wusheng said nothing. *I thought we might cross paths in battle, maybe, but I can't say I ever thought we'd be squeezed into the same carriage.*

Ning Huaishan's eyes swept over the tight black cloth on Yi Wusheng's mouth. "Hey, looks like the old gent's treatment in this carriage's pretty awful, huh? I—"

All the targeted sarcasm was beginning to color Yi Wusheng's pale skin when he saw the silver sword hilt by the door rise and strike the back of Ning Huaishan's legs. With a loud thump, he fell to his knees in front of Yi Wusheng.

For a second, Ning Huaishan was dazed, then he clutched his numb legs and cursed under his breath. He glared at the one who had hit him. He met the downcast, expressionless eyes of the Tianxiu Immortal, who waved a finger as the sword returned to his side. Ning Huaishan caught a glimpse of the black Victoria water lily on Xiao Fuxuan's wrist and remembered this was his archon's puppet, and thus whatever it did was his archon's wish. He turned to look at Wu Xingxue.

"Archon, did you make him hit me?"

No, I certainly did not, Wu Xingxue thought. He narrowed his eyes at Xiao Fuxuan across the carriage. Xiao Fuxuan stared back, his gaze

piercing the gloom, before he subtly arched an eyebrow and turned his face away as if this had nothing to do with him.

Isn't driving a wedge between me and my people beneath you, Lord Immortal? He rubbed his warmed fingers and observed for a while, then knocked on the tabletop and addressed Ning Huaishan.

"There's no need to keep kneeling. Somebody's trying to get in and you're blocking the door. Sit over there."

"Who?" Ning Huaishan glowered behind himself.

One-Arm clung to the doorframe with his only hand, one leg already in the carriage, the other still hanging out the door. With a blank look at Ning Huaishan, he said, "I've waited for you long enough. Get inside."

Ning Huaishan didn't speak, but he felt so stifled he could barely stand it. He stared at the empty seat next to Yi Wusheng for ages, glanced to where Xiao Fuxuan stood holding his sword, then gritted his teeth and took the seat beside Wu Xingxue. That was when he saw Xiao Fuxuan's sword twitch. Reflexively, Ning Huaishan bounced up before his butt could touch the wooden seat and hustled to the seat next to Yi Wusheng. There he sat, nestled up next to his archenemy.

"It's one thing not to let me sit where I like, but you don't have to hit me, Archon," he mumbled.

Wu Xingxue did not reply, and question marks practically bubbled out of him. *Who exactly won't let you sit?*

Once Ning Huaishan realized Xiao Fuxuan never had any intention of drawing his sword, he felt ashamed of his overreaction but was too self-conscious to switch seats again. He had no choice but to remain squeezed in tight next to Yi Wusheng, the expression on his face fit for a funeral.

One-Arm peered left and right before squeezing in beside Ning Huaishan. This wasn't because he didn't dare sit next to Wu Xingxue, but because sitting next to Ning Huaishan made it easier to speak through etheric whispers and keep their conversation between the two of them. With a finger on Ning Huaishan, he sent his voice via this method.

‹Did you notice the archon hasn't moved this whole time? What about how he keeps holding that hand-warming stove?›

Wu Xingxue's vital force tended to the extreme cold, even colder than a three-thousand-mile stretch of the snow-covered Boundless Sea. A layer of frigid mist often swirled over swords he touched, and when he held someone by the chin, hoarfrost spread from his fingers to their face.

He did not feel fear; he caused it. He had certainly never feared the cold. How could one such as him cling so eagerly to a hand-warming stove of all things?

‹I was so angry earlier that I lost my head and didn't notice anything amiss,› Ning Huaishan etheric-whispered back. *‹Now that I've had time to think about it… The first person I saw once I managed to crawl out of Twilight Fen alive was the archon. He watched my wound heal and fester and heal again.›*

It was possible that the archon had forgotten something that happened more than thirty years ago, but to see the wound and still have no recollection of it was definitely odd. Now that they had boarded the carriage, the two fiendlings were even more certain about their prior speculations.

The carriage traveled for three days without stopping, circumventing more than twenty restrictive wards set by cultivation clans before pulling within sight of the Valley of Laments. Wu Xingxue lifted the curtain and took in the outside.

Within the snowy fog, a giant ravine crouched silently between two cliffs. A long, narrow bridge hung across the deep trench, leading to the valley's entrance. The bridge's chains were covered in vines that hung unevenly from its sides. At first glance, it appeared that no one had been here for a long time, but to their surprise, there was an inn less than a third of a mile from the bridge.

Well, "inn" might have been too generous. It was comprised of a couple of large thatch-roofed huts: One had a roof but no walls, and though it might protect the tables and chairs within from rain falling straight down, it could not block the wind that whipped sideways. Standing behind it, the other hut looked like a place where travelers could shelter for a couple of days—and it was occupied. The carriage stopped in front of the hut.

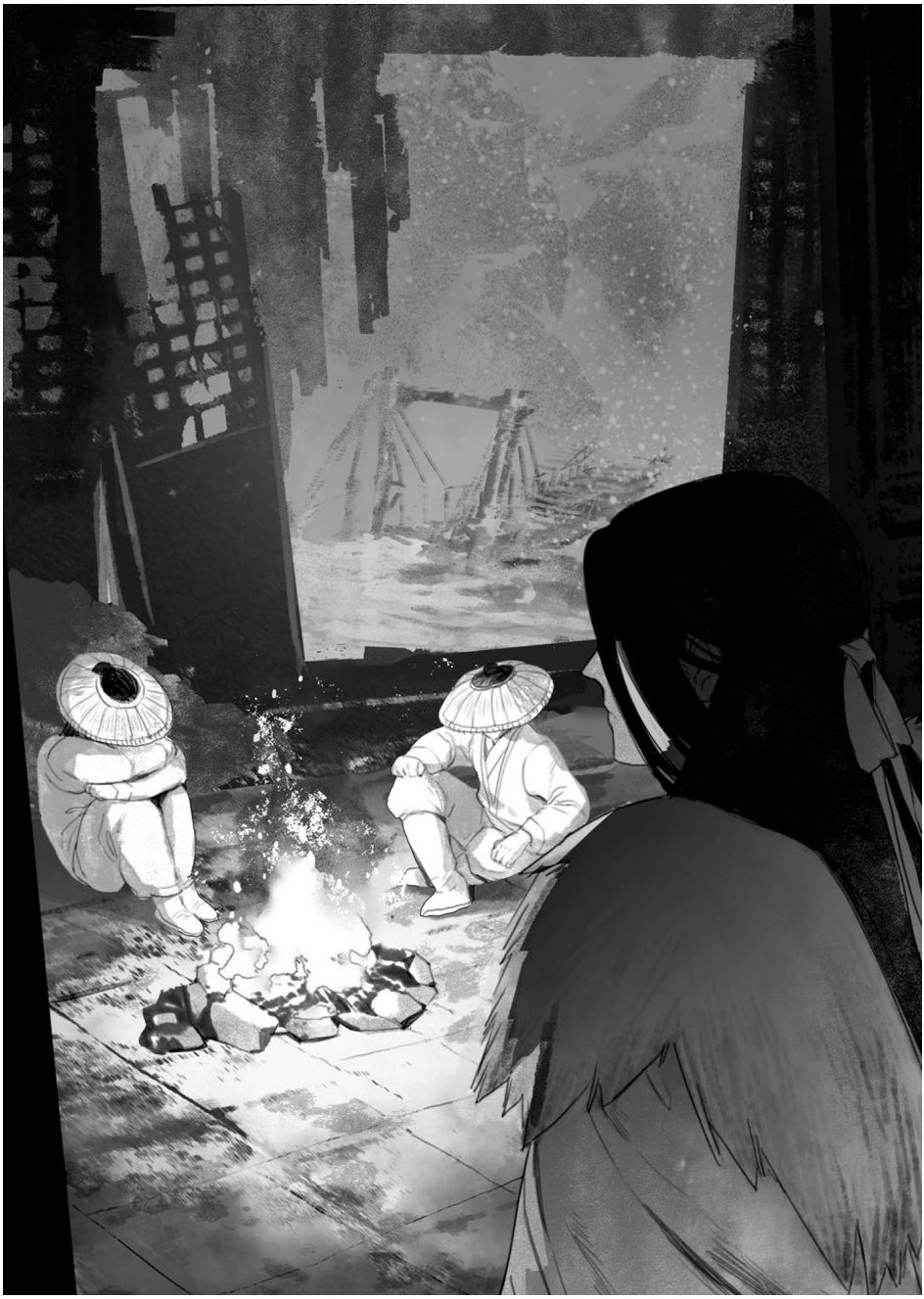
"We know the area around the Valley of Laments best," said Ning

Huaishan. “Us two’ll take a look around and clear some obstacles so they won’t hold up your journey into the valley, Archon.” With that, he and One-Arm continued on ahead.

Meanwhile, Wu Xingxue and the others alighted from the carriage and approached the huts. Lest the current occupants find his appearance strange, Yi Wusheng grabbed a long scarf kept on the carriage for cold days. He wrapped it around his neck several times to hide the black cloth on his face, then spoke to the people staying in the hut.

“May I ask what brings you here? The Valley of Laments is long sealed.”

Three of the people in the hut looked like clan initiates, though they were not wearing their clan’s insignia. They appeared quite young, and their robes fluttered in the wind as if, despite the midwinter day, they did not fear the cold. They stared warily at the carriage’s arrival.



The other four—two men and two women, all middle-aged—were dressed in rustic clothing and looked more like typical commoners. To keep out the draft, perhaps, their arms and legs were tightly wrapped, and they wore thick cotton scarves wrapped around their necks. Deep wrinkles crisscrossed with scars lined their faces. On the table before them, weapons rested beside several bowls of steaming hot tea.

The eyes of one of the women were red as if she'd been crying. Her gaze darted around and swept over Yi Wusheng before landing on Wu Xingxue. Perhaps it was because Yi Wusheng was swaddled in scarves just like they were, and Wu Xingxue wasn't carrying any weapons and only had a heating stove in his arms, posing no threat.

The woman hesitated for a moment before replying, "There's no other way. I came looking for someone."

"Looking for someone?" Wu Xingxue asked doubtfully.

"Yeah." The woman nodded. "My two daughters—"

"Don't say too much," the initiate sitting next to her urged with a cough. The area around the Valley of Laments had always been uncanny, and it was even more so since being sealed away. Sorrow and despair hung like a shroud over the entire valley. An aura of death thickened the air. Living visitors were few and far between.

"We told you before we left that those we meet here may not necessarily be people," he softly emphasized.

Wu Xingxue had good ears and heard the entire conversation clearly. He raised an eyebrow.

Well, you're not wrong, he thought. *We're a soul remnant, an undead, and a fiend. Not a one of us is human.*

Acting like he hadn't heard the initiate, Wu Xingxue walked over. "If you're trying to find someone, why are you just sitting here?"

The initiate frowned and paused. "Have you never been to the Valley of Laments before?"

Since Ning Huaishan and One-Arm weren't there, Wu Xingxue said, "No, I haven't."

"No wonder," said the initiate. "The valley's been sealed for ages. Very few people have come here since, so they don't know the rules." The initiate pointed at the bridge. "You can only enter the valley at

night. After sunset, the lamps will light up in the shrine at the valley's entrance. You can't cross the bridge until the lamps are lit. Crossing it otherwise means certain death."

Wu Xingxue glanced at the bridge. "What do you mean?"

"There's creatures clinging to the underside of that bridge, packed in tight," the woman whispered.

"If it's so dangerous and there are so many restrictive wards along the way, how could anyone accidentally stumble in here and end up needing to be rescued?" asked Yi Wusheng.

"Because they didn't come here by accident," the woman said. She glanced at the shrine sitting at the entrance to the valley. "They were invoked."

Hearing the soft, metallic clink of a sword moving next to him, Wu Xingxue turned and noticed a deep line between Xiao Fuxuan's brows. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"*Invoked*," Xiao Fuxuan repeated in a low tone. "In the past, only one kind of ritual called for an invocation."

"What kind of ritual?"

"To receive a name conferred by heaven—to be invoked as a celestial."

Most became celestials through cultivation and apotheosis, with one vanishingly rare exception: those who became celestials through invocation.

In Urbs Caelestia, heaven could bestow courtesy names on those invoked to become celestials by heavenly edict, leaving them beyond the jurisdiction of the Twelve Immortals of the Spirit Terrace.

Only two such people ever existed in Urbs Caelestia, and one was Xiao Fuxuan. Why would an invocation from heaven appear in the Valley of Laments?

Chapter 16:
Digging One's Own Grave

SPEAKING OF HAVING a courtesy name conferred by heaven…

Wu Xingxue swiped a finger over the skin beneath Xiao Fuxuan's ear. The Tianxiu Immortal's sword was said to move faster than lightning from the ninth heaven, beheading rule-breakers in the blink of an eye. Fiends from all corners of the world kept at least a hundred feet away from him, and ordinary people could never get close either.

By the time Wu Xingxue recalled these legends, it was too late for regrets—he'd already reached out. Yet Xiao Fuxuan merely raised the sword in his hand a smidgen and lowered it again. The ringing drone of metal stopped as soon as it began, and in the space of a breath, the surge of sharp aggression receded into the scabbard. The transformation startled Wu Xingxue.

Xiao Fuxuan tipped his chin, his gaze falling on Wu Xingxue's finger. "What were you touching?" His tone resonated, and there was a visible quiver in his throat when he spoke.

Wu Xingxue curled his finger and withdrew his hand. "Hmm. What happened to that name of yours? Seems like it never made an appearance."

Xiao Fuxuan glanced at the hut. They were in mixed company, and he seemed unwilling to say more. He answered with only two words: "It's gone."

That was a given! With Urbs Caelestia and the Spirit Terrace destroyed, it was only natural that the mark showing his heaven-conferred name, *Mian*, was gone as well. Wu Xingxue wondered why he was befuddled enough to ask such a redundant, stupid question. He tried to brush off this question with a shrug, but Xiao Fuxuan continued.

"It wasn't always visible before either."

"Wasn't always visible?" Wu Xingxue asked a bit curiously. "So a name conferred by heaven can fade in and out?"

"Mm-hmm."

“Then what makes it fade out, and what makes it fade back in?”

For reasons unclear to Wu Xingxue, he received no answer. Instead, Xiao Fuxuan raised his hand to his neck and pinched at the skin where his name should have been. Shooting a look at Wu Xingxue, he walked toward the hut without another word, leaving Wu Xingxue confounded.

Xiao Fuxuan approached the side of the hut where the woman sat wrapped in a thick overcoat. “Why do you believe it’s an invocation?”

One of the initiates beside her tried to stop her from answering, but another held him back while staring apprehensively at Xiao Fuxuan.

“Because there were names on their necks.” The woman gestured at her own neck, but because her coat was so thick, the gesture was clumsy, making her red eyes seem even sadder and emptier.

Names on their necks? Wu Xingxue felt he was missing context. Fortunately, the initiate couldn’t bear to watch in silence any longer and stepped in.

“This has been plaguing the outskirts of Brightwater for some time. The first one they lost was a woodcutter. Perfectly healthy man, he woke up one day with a name on his neck as if…as if the name had been conferred by heaven. It was part of his body; no matter how hard he washed or scrubbed, it wouldn’t fade.” He shot a quick glance at Xiao Mian’s neck. “Later that very night, the woodcutter went missing—along with his axe and the censer from the household shrine.”

Yi Wusheng was confused by the story. “The censer?”

“Yes, the censer,” the initiate said with a nod. “His family thought it strange and looked everywhere for it, but they just couldn’t find it. Seven days later, the entire family had the same dream. They dreamt of the woodcutter sitting cross-legged on the shrine, one hand holding the axe, the other hand raising the censer, and his severed head on his thigh. He was covered in the blood dripping from the stump of his neck, and then the head spoke.”

“What did it say?”

“That he’d been invoked to become a god and consecrated at the cliffside shrine in the Valley of Laments. It told his family to bring him offerings of incense. As soon as the family woke up, they came to us for help. Everyone knows the valley’s been sealed for ages, so nobody

wanted to go unless it was absolutely necessary. Eventually, some of the senior disciples took pity on them, so they bought some Dreamsbane from the Hua Clan and journeyed to the valley. With the Dreamsbane's help, our senior disciples made it out safe and sound—but because it was such a short trip, they didn't have time to find the woodcutter. They just found his axe, covered in blood."

When the initiate mentioned the Hua Clan's Dreamsbane, Wu Xingxue stole a glance at Yi Wusheng. With downcast eyes, Yi Wusheng nodded, then reached for the cloth that covered his mouth, pulling it up to cover most of his face. His expression was pained. Everyone relied on Dreamsbane to travel safely to and from the treacherous Valley of Laments, but its maker was not so fortunate. It was truly unfair.

"Ever since then, people keep falling prey to it, the same thing every time—names appear suddenly on their necks, only for the people to disappear the same night," the initiate continued. "Tying the victims to their beds and keeping vigil through the night was no use. Whoever was watching would suddenly fall asleep. The next morning, the ropes would be intact but covered in blood. Almost as if…"

The initiate turned a faint green. "Almost as if someone sliced them where they were bound and dragged them out in pieces. No matter how they vanished, the missing person would send a dream to their family saying they'd been invoked to become a celestial and that their family must go to the valley to offer them incense. Her family also fell prey to the scourge." The initiate pointed at the woman. "Both her daughters are gone, so we came to help her look for them. But the truth is—"

His lips parted as though he was about to conclude: *We'll never find them.* At the sight of the woman's reddened eyes, however, he swallowed his words.

"Your clan sent only three people to investigate such a horrifying affair?" asked Yi Wusheng, stunned.

The three initiates grumbled. "Well, yes. A few days ago, Tealspire collapsed into the Boundless Sea. Most of our disciples went there, and our clan suffered significant losses. We're not a major clan, either, so our manpower's limited."

Wu Xingxue had been planning to sit in the thatch-roofed hut until dark, but hearing these words, he turned right back to the carriage. He'd forgotten what it was like to be reviled by the whole

world. For now, rather than spooking a few nameless cultivator brats, he preferred to wrap himself in a blanket and take a nap.

He hoped to dream of Magpie Haven or his past while he rested, but he did not. Inexplicably, he dreamed only of incomplete images, a partial figure, and the shape of that name, *Mian*, shimmering softly in gold, so close it seemed to brush the tip of his nose.

Wu Xingxue opened his eyes with a start to find Xiao Fuxuan bending over him. He licked his parched lips and grabbed Xiao Fuxuan's wrist.

"You're—" Before he could continue, Wu Xingxue heard a metallic chime and looked down to find a pair of silver bells hooked over Xiao Fuxuan's fingertip. They were the same flower-guarding bells Xiao Fuxuan had tied to his wrist at the Hua estate. Wu Xingxue stared at the bells in a daze. "What's this all about? Are you going to fasten them to me again?" Xiao Fuxuan did not answer. He allowed Wu Xingxue to keep holding his wrist, but his fingers persisted. As he lowered his head to finish tying the silver bells to Wu Xingxue's belt, his neck and the shell of his ear came close to Wu Xingxue's face. Wu Xingxue's eyes wandered to the spot where *Mian* should have been written.

"Heavenly chains cannot be undone. This is all I have," Xiao Fuxuan said quietly.

Wu Xingxue waited for a moment to let go of Xiao Fuxuan's wrist. *The chains can't be undone. So what? What does that have to do with these bells?*

But before long, he understood.

Outside the carriage, the sun had already set. According to the clan initiates, it was now safe to cross the bridge and enter the valley.

Wu Xingxue stepped out of the carriage behind Xiao Fuxuan. The others were already gathered by the suspension bridge. As night fell, a blizzard kicked up over the valley. When Wu Xingxue walked, the chains clinked against his body. They were actually quite small, and though he couldn't see them, he could feel them. Each was nailed through his bones and into his soul, and like a shadow, they followed him wherever he went.

"What's that noise?" the initiates mumbled.

The initiates had heard the rattling chains as Wu Xingxue drew near. They followed the sound, looking around until their eyes finally landed on Wu Xingxue. They were immediately on guard but sighed with relief once they saw the silver bells at Wu Xingxue's waist.

"And here I was, thinking you were hanging bells on me for no reason," Wu Xingxue muttered. He turned and met Xiao Fuxuan's cold eyes. "Lord Immortal? What are you—"

Xiao Fuxuan lifted his sword and pressed the tip of the scabbard against Wu Xingxue's lower back, cutting him off and prodding him forward.

"Get on the bridge," he ordered in a deep tone.

Fine. You have a sword, so what you say goes. Wu Xingxue stepped forward onto the narrow suspension bridge.

Having returned from their trek around the valley, Ning Huaishan and One-Arm were ahead of Wu Xingxue. Nothing seemed to have changed, though they reminded him from time to time to stay close.

"Archon, we've cleared out the filth and ghouls for miles around. Once we're in the valley, don't stray too far from us, and don't dirty your hands with the small fry. We'll take care of them."

"Oh, how nice," Wu Xingxue responded offhandedly, watching the backs of their heads.

"Of course!"

Earlier, the other group of travelers had said that the underside of the bridge was crawling with creatures, and crossing at night was the only way not to alarm them. Wu Xingxue wondered at the cause of this and tried to feel for what might prowl beneath his feet. He sensed nothing at all beneath the bridge. Were the others mistaken, or had the creatures disappeared for some reason?

Their crossing proceeded so smoothly it was bizarre. The clan initiates seemed to agree, as they looked back several times.

"How odd," one mumbled.

The plateau where they now stood held a shrine with a solitary oil lamp that had lit on its own.

"This is the mountain shrine of the Valley of Laments. Once we pass through, we'll be at the valley's entrance. Careful where you step,"

an initiate said, though he sounded incredulous. The other initiates couldn't stop glancing behind themselves. "There's a tomb below the valley, so be careful to avoid the trap doors, or you'll fall through."

Just as he finished warning everyone to be extra careful, someone fell through a trap door. That someone was none other than Wu Xingxue—and the ones who pushed him down were none other than his two filial underlings.

The so-called tomb was merely a giant cliff cave with an idol standing in the center. Covered in moss and tangled vines, it looked as though no one had worshipped here for a long time. Countless cavities lined the walls around Wu Xingxue, some silent and dark, others set with single oil lamps. These lamps, too, had lit up on their own, like a silent offering unclaimed for time immemorial.

When Wu Xingxue landed, Ning Huaishan and One-Arm disappeared, hiding themselves away in one of the depressions in the wall. The only sound in the tomb was the patter of gently falling waterdrops. Wu Xingxue stood beside the idol and examined his surroundings.

In a flash, dozens of bone-white shadows surrounded him—ghouls of some kind. Places filled with the dead tended to spawn them. They appeared almost human aside from their thin, elongated limbs and their skin as white as the wax of funereal candles. The corners of their gaping, toothless, black mouths stretched all the way to their ears. Their eyes were all blown-out pupil with no whites to them and resembled two curving black holes when they smiled. These creatures consumed the souls of the living and chewed on their bones. When they came close, the cries and screams of countless dead emanated from their wide, hungry maws.

These were the very monsters that liked to cling to the bottom of the bridge. Over the span of three hours, Ning Huaishan and One-Arm had caught dozens and hid them away in a spirit-binding pouch. Ghouls were intractable and hard to kill, crawling onto the bodies of those who weren't fast enough to escape. There were only two ways to handle them: use a spirit-binding pouch or let them eat their fill.

Ning Huaishan and One-Arm were dead certain Wu Xingxue wasn't really Wu Xingxue. Plus, he was empty-handed and didn't have a single weapon or spirit-binding pouch. They hid in one of the wall cavities and waited to watch the ghouls assault this man who dared to

impersonate their archon. They'd teach him a lesson he wouldn't soon forget. But as the ghouls closed in on the fake archon beneath the idol, the fiendlings saw him relax his shoulders and sigh.

"You two have a real gift for finding trouble," he muttered, tossing aside the warming stove tucked in his sleeve. The stove rolled in a circle on the ground, its metallic scrape echoing throughout the tomb.

"We're finished," said Ning Huaishan without thinking.

A ghoul threw itself at Wu Xingxue, its mouth widening to consume his vital energy. A moment later, Wu Xingxue had a hand on its shoulder and two fingers hooked in its gaping mouth. Something snapped, and the sound of cracking bones rang through the cavern as Wu Xingxue tore off the ghoul's head. Blood flew.

Ning Huaishan squeezed his eyes shut as his hair stood on end. The cracking noises did not stop. He was too damned familiar with that sound.

"We're finished!" repeated Ning Huaishan.

Beside him, One-Arm was also panicking. "This isn't right! This isn't right at all!"

For an ordinary person, or perhaps even an ordinary clan initiate, several dozen ghouls posed a significant threat. Why else would they have been so cautious crossing the suspension bridge? But against Wu Xingxue—the *real* Wu Xingxue—the ghouls didn't stand a chance.

Ning Huaishan swallowed. When he opened his eyes again, the ghouls they'd spent hours capturing were scattered in pieces across the floor, every last one parted from its head. Sticky blood ebbed and flowed in every direction, until a rivulet carrying the smell of copper wound its way to their hiding spot.

Wu Xingxue seized the last ghoul by the throat, hoarfrost spreading from his fingertips until its face was entirely covered. The chill traced the flowing blood until the icy trail reached Ning Huaishan and One-Arm.

It all happened in the blink of an eye. They had just enough time to glance at the frozen blood before looking up to find Wu Xingxue standing directly in front of them.

"So, this is where you've been hiding? I looked all over for you," said Wu Xingxue.

Ning Huaishan stopped breathing. *Oh no. I'm dead.*

Wu Xingxue raised one hand.

A short while later, the underground tomb was no longer filled with the echoes of breaking bones, and the only sound was the plip-plop of falling waterdrops—each of them drumming on the two spineless weaklings' hearts. Ning Huaishan and One-Arm had gotten to keep their lives, but for the crime of staging an uprising against their archon, they were tied together with a long, narrow rope. A close look revealed that the rope was no more than two belts tied together. Of course, a mere belt couldn't restrain a fiendling; it was Wu Xingxue's vital force and domineering aura that held them fast.

Wu Xingxue did not kill the last ghoul. He froze it half to death and carried it to Ning Huaishan and One-Arm. After robbing his two underlings of their spirit-binding pouch, he patted their heads and smiled.

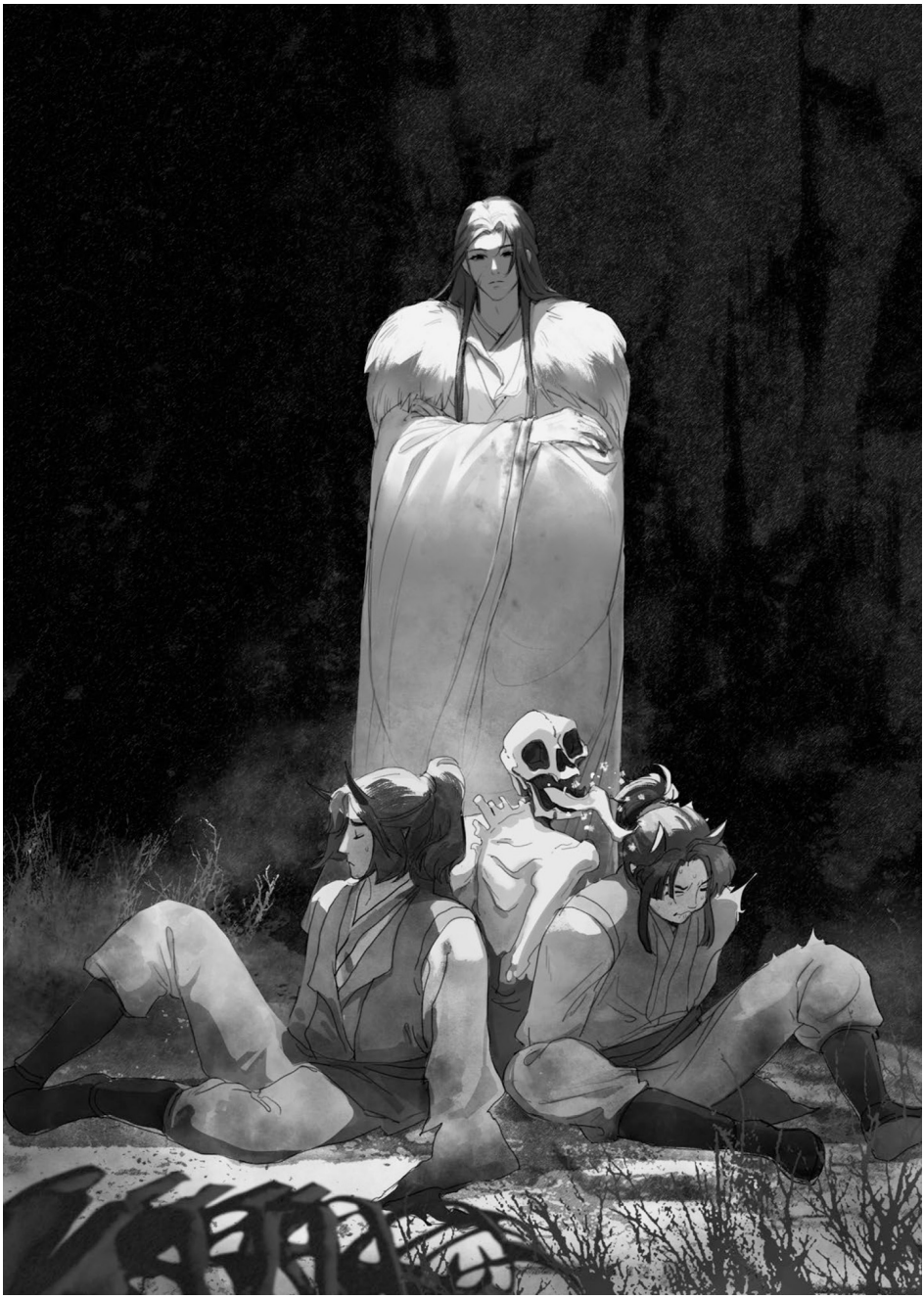
"Hey, you two gave me so many! It would hardly be fair of me not to give back a little."

Ning Huaishan was on the verge of tears. "Archon…" he whimpered. "I was wrong!"

"There's no use blubbering now," Wu Xingxue said as he tied the ghoul down between the two fiendlings. It livened up as it slowly defrosted. When it realized it couldn't break free, it struggled and snarled angrily—until it noticed the enticing scent of living creatures immediately to its left and right.

Its empty black eyes and mouth curled upward in joy as it stretched its head left and "kissed" a stupefied One-Arm. Then it smacked its lips and stretched its head right toward Ning Huaishan.

"Fuck me!" Ning Huaishan cussed. And the ghoul kissed him, too.



Chapter 17:
Sworn Enemies

WU XINGXUE LOWERED his eyes to find his hands covered in blood.

He'd worried that he'd be unable to handle a fight without his memories. To avoid making a fool of himself, he'd surreptitiously circulated his inner force while traveling to the Valley of Laments on the off chance he might need it. He never imagined that, faced with some minor inconvenience, he wouldn't have to even think.

He wondered how many years he'd been an archfiend and how many he'd killed to carve these automatic movements into his bones. Before entering the valley, he had wondered what sort of relationship existed between him and Xiao Fuxuan. Though one was an immortal in charge of the Northern Domain of Tealspire and the other was an archfiend imprisoned there for twenty-five years, maybe things between them weren't so awful.

Now, as he looked at his bloodied hands, he could not imagine anything good.

Wu Xingxue reflected for a moment more before turning to his two filial underlings. The ghoul happily held One-Arm's face aloft, kissing him with such enthusiasm that One-Arm seemed eager for death.

Ning Huaishan, who had taken just a few of the ghoul's kisses, had his lips pursed so tightly together that he resembled an old toothless woman. He wished he could sew the ghoul's mouth shut…or even his own. That would be fine too.

Wu Xingxue approached them. At the sight of him, Ning Huaishan began to cry big, sloppy tears. "Archon, we made a mistake! We just thought someone was impersonating you, Archon. We would never turn against you, so—"

Wu Xingxue nodded. "Oh, I know."

Ning Huaishan's sobs stopped short. *Huh? How could you know that?* He stammered and swallowed the rest of his words.

Since he'd used the word "impersonate," Wu Xingxue decided to pull up his robes, bend down, and grab the ghoul by the back of the neck. The ghoul stretched its lips as far as it could but failed to reach One-Arm, who breathed a sigh of relief. He was trembling down to his soul, and so much of his vital energy had been consumed that he'd turned an awful shade of green.

"Archon," One-Arm called out. He was about to apologize and reaffirm his loyalty when Wu Xingxue interrupted with a question.

"I know his name is Ning Huaishan, but what about you? What are you called?"

One-Arm's teary pleas stuck in his throat. "Wh-wh-what?"

Wu Xingxue tried again. "I'm asking you what your full name is."

"Fang Chu… Archon, my name is Fang Chu." One-Arm still looked stunned. "*You* were the one who named me that."

Really? Wu Xingxue never considered that an archon who ruled over heaven and earth might be in charge of naming too.

"You said now that I was a part of Nightgleam, I ought to stop thinking about the past and take a new name. Back then, I was fighting feral ghosts and ghouls for food, and I didn't have a name anyhow. You gave me that name, and I've kept it till now," said One-Arm—or Fang Chu.

Wu Xingxue listened, but it didn't ring a bell.

"What happened to you, Archon?"

Wu Xingxue decided to come right out and say it. "I spent too long locked up in the Northern Domain of Tealspire. Can't remember a thing from my past."

"Huh?" At a loss, Fang Chu and Ning Huaishan stared at each other. They suddenly understood why their archon seemed like he was being impersonated.

Wu Xingxue watched them with his jet-black eyes. "From now on, whatever I ask about, just tell me." As an afterthought, he added, "And don't forget, make sure you never, ever lie to me."

"No! No no no," the two underlings said in unison, shaking their heads like a couple of pellet drums. "We would never, *ever* do that."

"Since I've forgotten what happened before," Wu Xingxue said

unhurriedly, “no matter how long you’ve been my followers or how much camaraderie we established over that time, I will not honor it. Let me ask you this—was I mean back then?”

How the hell am I supposed to answer that? Ning Huaishan wondered.

Wu Xingxue smiled. “Well, I’m worse now.”

The two shell-shocked underlings turned to the still-hungry ghoul with its outstretched lips.

Understood, they thought. It was hard to say whether he was “mean,” but he was definitely twisted.

Once Wu Xingxue finished issuing his threats, he let the ghoul go. As soon as it regained its freedom, its great big mouth slurped straight for Ning Huaishan. Before it reached him, Wu Xingxue released the underlings from his aura and untied the belts he’d used to restrain them.

“Put your pants on.”

Ning Huaishan jerked his arms and confirmed that he could move again. He immediately raised a hand to push the ghoul’s face away, then grabbed his pants and bounced to his feet.

“You bastard! Just one mouthful after another—you think you’re on a roll, don’t you?! You got that shit all over my face! *Blech!”*

He retched and cursed in equal measure before he and Fang Chu put the depraved ghoul to death and threw it to the ground with a splat. They tied their belts and rubbed their mouths vigorously to dispel any lingering taste of ghoul.

Wu Xingxue paid them no mind. Instead, he followed the sound of dripping water to a small, cold pool. He just found himself so strange. Faced with two of his own underlings who had almost killed him, he told them everything, even revealing his amnesia. But when facing Xiao Fuxuan, he covered up so much that it made the secret that much more obvious.

What are you trying to hide? Hasn’t he already noticed that you’re the genuine article?

Archfiends killed in accordance with natural law, so it was normal to have some blood on his hands. What was he washing it off for?

What a waste of time.

Wu Xingxue stood next to the cold pool. After a brief pause, he carefully held the hems of his robes away from the water and crouched, washing the blood from his hands. Once clean, he lifted his fingers to his nose and gave them a sniff.

Not a shred of the heating stove's warmth remained. His vital force was cold to begin with, and after freezing enough blood to fill a tomb, his fingers felt like ice. On the upside, at least they didn't smell like blood anymore.

"Archon," Ning Huaishan called.

Wu Xingxue straightened and headed back, instinctively looking above him as he did. He could see the spot where Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu had pushed him through earlier. There was probably a trapdoor there leading to the mountain shrine above, but the trapdoor and ceiling were perfectly aligned. He could not see where the door was, nor could he hear what was happening on the other side.

Seeing him look up and recalling that he'd lost his memories, Ning Huaishan considerately explained. "Archon, you may not remember, but those stupid initiates were wrong. You can't just fall down through the trapdoor whenever you want. Fang Chu and I know this area like the backs of our hands, and this tomb was meant to be a secret. It's only accessible once a day, and it's sealed with thaumaturgy. No one is exempt. Those above can't come down here…at least not for now."

As he rambled on, he saw that Wu Xingxue was staring at him and gradually shut his mouth.

"Did I say I wanted anyone to come down here?" Wu Xingxue asked softly.

Ning Huaishan faltered. "You did not."

"Then why do you go on and on?"

"I was wrong."

While Wu Xingxue wasn't looking, Ning Huaishan slapped himself in the mouth. He was about to say, *I'll never talk too much again,* when he heard the archon say, "In the past, Xiao Fuxuan and I…"

Ning Huaishan waited for the rest of the sentence, but Wu Xingxue trailed off, either to deliberate over what words to use or for some other reason. After a long wait, he seemed to give up.

“How were things between us?” he finished.

A giant question mark drew itself in Ning Huaishan’s head. *You need to ask? How else could things be between immortal and archfiend?*

He almost suspected the archon was testing him. But considering Wu Xingxue’s opaque disposition, Ning Huaishan didn’t try to outsmart him. He instead replied honestly: “I don’t know.”

Wu Xingxue was taken aback. “You don’t know? Weren’t you working at my side?”

“Yes, I was with you most of the time.”

“Then, how could you not know?”

This put Ning Huaishan in a difficult spot. “Archon, uh… Please don’t be offended if I tell you.”

Wu Xingxue promised no such thing. “Go on.”

Ning Huaishan hesitated. How could he not?

“It’s hard to pin down who you’re fond of or who you loathe,” Ning Huaishan eventually said. “Asking me to guess is kind of a trick question, don’t you think?”

He’d left the city with Wu Xingxue many times and did a lot of work for him, so in theory he ought to have known him quite well. Still, he found Wu Xingxue impossible to gauge; his archon was far too adept at lying.

Wu Xingxue sometimes altered his appearance with a glamour when he went out, and he looked different every time. The foundation of his features was still there, so no matter how different he looked, he was never ugly. With nothing more than a white jade crown on casually styled hair, his winning looks matched the young men who rode on horses and leaned on bridge railings, pretty as a painting—the type favored by young women. He *looked* laid-back and nonchalant, and at any moment he could be flirtatious or happy or gifted with witty words. Sometimes, he dazzled even Ning Huaishan into thinking this charming version of the archon was the truth.

Fortunately, Ning Huaishan was sober enough to know it was all a lie. One might enjoy chatting with the archon one second only to end up dead by his hand the next. Having accompanied Wu Xingxue to many places and met many people who died by his hands, when they met someone new, Ning Huaishan still could not guess whether it was

someone Wu Xingxue intended to keep or kill.

He'd also seen Xiao Fuxuan before, though not that many times. By order of the Heavenly Principles, Xiao Fuxuan had to guard the Northern Domain of Tealspire, and so he wasn't supposed to visit the mortal realm often. As luck would have it, Wu Xingxue somehow always managed to run into Xiao Fuxuan each time he visited, reminding Ning Huaishan of the saying "the world wasn't big enough for the both of them."

Would an archfiend be happy to see the immortal charged solely with heavenly punishment? Of course not. Ning Huaishan never forgot the look on Wu Xingxue's face when he spotted Xiao Fuxuan in the distance; it was the kind of loathing that even a glamour could not conceal. Whenever it happened, Wu Xingxue would send Ning Huaishan back to Nightgleam ahead of him, and he was never sure what took place between the two of them. What he did know was that every time Wu Xingxue returned, his mood was invariably worse than before. Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu would try to keep at least a hundred feet away from him to avoid the fallout. Having seen this situation enough times, they considered the words "Xiao Fuxuan" and "Tianxiu Immortal" taboo, and they avoided bringing him up as much as possible.

With fiends thriving and Urbs Caelestia putting ever more pressure on Nightgleam, Ning Huaishan always assumed that things between his archon and Xiao Fuxuan would come to a head. He did not find it odd at all when Wu Xingxue attacked Urbs Caelestia. Ning Huaishan had tried many times to guess at what the archon might do, but that had been the only time he'd gotten it right.

Thinking about those twenty-five years of confinement, Ning Huaishan said, "I get the feeling that you and the Tianxiu Immortal must have known each other for a very long time. You two go way back. Otherwise, things wouldn't have been so tense. You're probably sworn enemies."

Sworn enemies, huh, thought Wu Xingxue.

Ning Huaishan was relieved that his archon's puppet wasn't there; he felt no guilt at all as long as he didn't have to look at its face. Even so, his wild speculations bordered on unscrupulous.

Hey, it'll be at least a day before this tomb opens again, and by then the archon will have forgotten this whole conversation, he assured himself.

Groping around in one of the wall cavities, Fang Chu suddenly cried out. “What the hell is this?!”

Ning Huaishan headed over to look when there was a loud explosion from above. He flinched in surprise before turning his face up to the ceiling and saw—*god dammit!*—a familiar beam of gold light thrust boldly into the tomb, forcefully penetrating its thaumaturgical seals.

The oil lamps around them trembled madly despite a total absence of wind. Their flames grew several dozen feet high, as if to engulf the entire tomb, but the instant they shot forward, they were extinguished. Following a loud boom, the ceiling of the shrine collapsed and crashed to the ground hundreds of feet below. Dust and smoke blew in every direction, and even the towering idol at the center of the tomb cracked beneath the impact. Ning Huaishan coughed violently several times and watched Xiao Fuxuan and the others emerge from the smoky fog.

Shit. Are the seals that easy to break?

Just as the thought occurred to him, he and Fang Chu felt a gentle kick to their backs. They stumbled forward several steps to end up right in the middle of a pile of dead ghouls.

When Yi Wusheng and the others looked into the tomb, they saw this tableau: a mountain of decapitated blue-white corpses, heads strewn across the tomb floor; a river of blood; and standing over it all, the blank-faced Ning Huaishan and Fan Chu, blood dried on their hands. The younger clan initiates paled at the sight, and the reactions of the commoners were better left to the imagination. Even Yi Wusheng was stunned by the spectacle.

He pinched the paper between his fingers. “You…you two… You killed *all* of them?” he asked in a rough voice.

Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu were dumbstruck. Realizing why Wu Xingxue had kicked them over, they both drily replied, “Yup!”

Meanwhile, the true culprit stood in the distance behind the damaged idol, his perfectly clean hands wrapped around the hand-warming stove he’d snagged from the floor.

Finally, I get to watch the show while someone else takes the blame for something they didn’t do, he thought, only to notice Xiao Fuxuan wasn’t looking at “someone else.” Through the cloud of dust and smoke, Xiao Fuxuan’s gaze was fixed squarely on him.

Their silent confrontation lasted only a moment before Xiao Fuxuan came over.

As soon as he moved, the others unfroze. Along with Yi Wusheng, they followed Xiao Fuxuan down from the collapsed ceiling, moving past the mountain of ghoul corpses as they gathered round. The clan initiates noticed the giant idol and turned their faces up to look at it.

"Didn't the legends call this a tomb? Why is there an idol enshrined here?"

"Say…when the senior disciples kept returning to the valley but were unable to find the invoked, was it because the missing were in this underground tomb?"

"No idea. It's a possibility. Let's look around."

Wu Xingxue listened, then he turned to the idol he'd ignored previously. In truth, he barely recognized any idols and was unable to differentiate between those he saw. All he knew for certain was that the idol *wasn't* the Mingwu Hua Xin enshrined in the Hua Clan nor the Tianxiu Immortal. As he tried to get a better look at its face, he felt someone come to stand beside him.

It was Xiao Fuxuan. He shot a glance at the idol as well, then his resonant voice rang out.

"What were those ghouls doing here?"

Wu Xingxue tipped his head and gave him a look. If he told him truthfully that Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu had brought the ghouls to screw him over, he'd have no explanation for why they'd also killed them. Instead, Wu Xingxue looked away.

"No idea. They were here when I got here. Maybe they'd been sealed inside this place."

Xiao Fuxuan pursed his lips. After a pause, he asked, "Did those two kill them for you?"

"Uh-huh." Wu Xingxue pretended to hold the hand-warming stove closer for warmth.

Because he'd just used his freezing vital energy, the stove did nothing to warm him. On the contrary, he'd chilled it completely. But who cared, really, as long as it wasn't noticeable. Except Xiao Fuxuan *did* notice—he gave the heating stove a sidelong glance before quickly raising his hand and wrapping it around Wu Xingxue's.

Wu Xingxue did not speak. Xiao Fuxuan had large hands, but his palms were thin. In the sarcophagus, they'd been covered in frost, but now they were quite warm.

Xiao Fuxuan held his hand for a time before bowing to murmur, "Cold as ice."

The words Ning Huaishan used to describe them rose in Wu Xingxue's mind: *sworn enemies.* While he had no idea what sworn enemies were like…he was sure they were not like this.

Chapter 18:
Celestial Tomb

"XIAO FUXUAN," Wu Xingxue said. He turned toward him.

"Mm-hmm," Xiao Fuxuan replied in a low tone, letting go of his hand.

Feeling the absence of Xiao Fuxuan's warmth, Wu Xingxue rubbed his fingers together. "Are you testing me?" he asked.

Xiao Fuxuan looked away. It took him some time to answer.

"I'm not."

"Really?"

Xiao Fuxuan said nothing, and Wu Xingxue was about to push when he realized that the stove in his hands was warm once more. Scalding heat spread through his skin and into his fingertips, easing the chill down to his bones. It went without saying who was responsible.

Xiao Fuxuan looked at Wu Xingxue but still did not speak. Perhaps his earlier words—*"Cold as ice"*—were an innocent description and not an accusation that he'd used his freezing vital energy.

While Wu Xingxue held the heating stove and ruminated, someone almost slammed into him. He pivoted to avoid colliding with them and saw it was one of the commoners who'd come searching for missing people.

The commoners did not know how to use thaumaturgy. After falling into this tomb and coming face-to-face with a pile of slaughtered ghouls, they'd been so terrified they hadn't known where to run. The blood had drained from their faces, and they'd stumbled around trying to avoid the gore until one of them blundered into Wu Xingxue. It was the woman with reddened eyes.

"So sorry, so sorry," she apologized profusely. "Th-this place is just so scary."

The commoners' thick winter coats were so tightly bound around their bodies that they restricted their movements, making them clumsy, and their nods looked more like bows. As the thick wadding of the

cotton coats compressed, the air around them took on a smell that Wu Xingxue found vaguely familiar. Before he could ask, an initiate said something that explained it.

"Hey, that smells like a lot of joss sticks."

"You people brought incense?" another initiate asked the commoners.

All of them stammered and refused to give a straight answer.

"Didn't we tell you before we came that you can't bring that stuff here? Why didn't you listen to us?" an initiate asked urgently.

Wu Xingxue put out a hand to right the unsteady, stumbling woman. "What's wrong with joss sticks?"

The initiate shot a glance at the woman with reddened eyes. "Like I said before, all the invoked people send dreams asking their families to bring offerings to the Valley of Laments. Now, the usual offerings are either food or incense, but this is where things go wrong. The people invoked…" He paused, then continued reluctantly. "Chances are, things did not go well for them. If, as it appeared in the dreams, they ended up dismembered in an uncanny place like the Valley of Laments, they'd be terribly vengeful."

The woman's eyes reddened further, and she began to shake all over. It was one thing to understand that events did not bode well for her daughters but quite another to hear it put so plainly. She looked as if she was barely staying on her feet, and the other commoners approached to keep her from falling, awkwardly patting her back to console her.

The initiate looked remorseful but squared himself to continue. "Offerings of food and incense are for real gods and don't do abominations any good. What they really want are living people." Fearing the commoners would remain obstinate and fail to understand, the initiate broke it down further. "If you bring joss sticks and snacks to try to fool them, you'll just make them angry. It's like if you were hungry and someone brought food you couldn't eat. Wouldn't you just get hungrier?"

The commoners gathered by the stone wall and listened without interrupting. In the end, they even licked their lips as if they felt the same hunger. The clan initiates grew increasingly frustrated.

“Haven’t you heard? Some of the families let their worries overwhelm their judgment. Instead of asking cultivators for help, they gathered food and joss sticks and came here by themselves. Do you know what happened to them? Not a single one came back. Rumor has it that some bloody scraps of clothing and leftover flesh and limbs were all that could be found of them. You people! Ah!”

The commoners did not make a sound, their faces gone utterly pale.

Wu Xingxue sniffed at the air around him again. He suddenly reached out a hand. “What did you guys bring? Take it out and show me.”

The commoners were startled at first, but then each one lifted their hands to their chest.

“Please don’t! You absolutely must not!” an initiate cried out. The cluster of initiates turned to Wu Xingxue and glared at him. “Sir, don’t mislead them!”

Wu Xingxue was the very image of innocence, but deep down he found it quite remarkable.

Isn’t everyone supposed to abhor me, like I’m a scorpion or venomous snake? Wow, these kids have guts. They even dare to glare at me! But he quickly realized that these initiates were fairly young. They probably hadn’t been born when he’d first been locked up in the Northern Domain of Tealspire, so it was only natural that they didn’t recognize him.

The initiates gave Xiao Fuxuan, Ning Huaishan, and Fang Chu a look. “Your companions may be master cultivators, but it’s unlikely they know everything—”

Hearing these words, Wu Xingxue felt a lot better. *They don’t even recognize the Tianxiu Immortal. They didn’t see a name written on his neck, so they just assumed Xiao Fuxuan is some rogue master cultivator.*

One of the initiates was more straightforward. “Since they’ve already brought the offerings, keeping them hidden away is better than having them out in the open.” He clapped his hands together and bowed to the commoners. “I beg of you, please keep your offerings to yourselves and don’t run off on your own. These abominations have already tasted human flesh, so there’s no going back for them. If no willing sacrifices come knocking at their doors, they might just come

out to catch something for themselves."

The commoners swallowed and nodded, wrapping their scarves even tighter around themselves.

Once the initiates finished explaining, one of them dug a gold-needled compass that sensed souls from his pocket. He held the compass aloft, searching, then pressed it against the idol.

"Uh, have you guys ever seen this idol before? How come I don't recognize it? Which god is enshrined here?"

One by one, the other initiates turned to look but were puzzled as well.

"Yeah, which god is that? I've never seen him before. Do you guys know him?"

"I don't recognize him."

"Didn't you memorize the Book of Gods?"

"Yeah, but I *still* don't recognize him."

An idol that even clan initiates don't recognize? That is rare indeed. Wu Xingxue peered at the object.

The impact of the collapse had left fine cracks all over the idol, but his beautiful face and graceful, elegant bearing were still visible. One of his hands held a white funeral banner. The other held a green branch with a long offshoot that reached up and up to where a flower bloomed at the top, its petals covering one of the idol's eyes.

If anyone had ever seen the idol, they wouldn't have easily forgotten, but no matter how hard the initiates racked their brains, they could not come up with an answer.

Even Yi Wusheng didn't know who it was. His forehead wrinkled so deep it looked like he was trying to turn his head inside out. He pondered for ages, but no name came to his lips.

Wu Xingxue grew increasingly intrigued. He raised a hand and poked Xiao Fuxuan before pointing at the idol; after all, it would be truly incredible if even Xiao Fuxuan could not identify it. "How about you? Do you know him?"

Thankfully, Xiao Fuxuan did not disappoint. His eyes swept over the idol and he nodded. Wu Xingxue waited for him to elaborate, then waited a bit longer. Finally, having received no reply, he poked him

again.

“His name was Yunhai,” Xiao Fuxuan said softly. “He was once a disciple of Mingwu Hua Xin. He later reached apotheosis and became a celestial.”

Wu Xingxue found this even stranger. “A disciple of Mingwu Hua Xin? Then he should have some history with the Hua Clan. After all, Hua Xin was a Hua Clan ancestor. How come Yi Wusheng’s never heard of him?”

“Because he stopped being a celestial,” Xiao Fuxuan said.

This caught Wu Xingxue by surprise.

Xiao Fuxuan fell quiet after he said those words, and his face grew distant. It was a long time before he spoke again. “Since he wasn’t a celestial anymore, every mortal in the world, all the cultivation clans, and even those who had known him for a long time forgot him.”

“Is that so?” Wu Xingxue said quietly. “Is that a rule in accordance with Urbs Caelestia?”

Xiao Fuxuan shook his head. “It is a rule in accordance with the Heavenly Principles.”

“How did he end up like this?”

“Many years ago, he was punished for violating a heavenly edict.”

Yunhai had been a disciple whom Hua Xin personally trained, and the two shared a close master-disciple relationship. When Yunhai reached apotheosis and became an immortal, he assumed custodianship of the rites of joy and sorrow, one of the most well-compensated commissions in terms of offerings. Later, he committed a wrongdoing, and the Spirit Terrace received a heavenly edict. With a single transfer order, he was sent elsewhere—to none other than the Valley of Laments.

Back then, the mortal world was at peace, with bountiful harvests, no natural disasters, and thriving cultivation clans. Fiends and ghouls were not uncommon, but they didn’t pose much of a threat. Before the strange incidents began to occur there, the valley was simply a thoroughfare between several large cities. Most passed through by horse and carriage without stopping. It was the subject of no legends nor rumors of perilous crossing. Because travelers had nothing to pray for, none paused midway through a trip to seek out a valley shrine and offer

incense.

Gods relied on offerings. If they went too long without worship, there was no need for their continued existence. Thus, less than a hundred years after his apotheosis, Yunhai fell back to the mortal world and became an ordinary man once more.

Alas, ten years later, war broke out in every corner of the mortal world, and the peaceful days came to an end. Endless disasters were followed by a devastation of fiends, with the areas around the Valley of Laments hit hardest. The displaced formed large groups, and all who traveled through the area did so in fear. Because of this, someone finally remembered the valley's mountain shrine. Travelers had stopped there ever since to pray before entering the valley. The shrine was small, just an incense altar and no idol. No one ever wondered why, because no one remembered that the Valley of Laments had once had its own numen.

Wu Xingxue got the gist of the story. "And what happened to Yunhai after that?"

Following a heavy moment of silence, Xiao Fuxuan replied, "He died."

"How?"

For a brief second, cynicism laced Xiao Fuxuan's expression. "He died here in the Valley of Laments. Fiends ate him until he was nothing but a husk."

"Ah."

It was terribly ironic that the god of the Valley of Laments had fallen victim to its fiends and that the offerings at his shrine had then grown abundant again—far too late to be of use to him.

Wu Xingxue studied the idol. As though he'd just thought of something, he asked, "If no one in the mortal realm remembers him anymore, what's an idol of him doing here?"

"When Hua Xin received news of Yunhai's death, he ignored the heavenly laws of the Spirit Terrace and came to the Valley of Laments to slaughter the fiends residing here. That done, he carved out this tomb beneath the valley."

Oh, no wonder. According to Ning Huaishan, this long-forgotten tomb was sealed with thaumaturgy, so it was hardly surprising that

Xiao Fuxuan was able to open it.

“You already knew about this place, then?” Wu Xingxue asked. “Have you been here before?”

“Yes, I have.”

Wu Xingxue paused meaningfully. “Did you come to see Yunhai?”

Xiao Fuxuan seemed momentarily lost in thought or recollection. It was a long time before he replied.

“He was not the only one in Urbs Caelestia to fall back to the mortal realm and meet a tragic end. And this is not the only idol in this tomb.”

Chapter 19:
Altar Girl

WU XINGXUE LOOKED at Xiao Fuxuan for a while before averting his eyes.

The cold, indifferent immortal almost seemed to be reminiscing about someone. An indescribably strange feeling bubbled up from Wu Xingxue's heart. All he knew was that he had no desire to keep seeking answers.

When Ning Huaishan came over, he noticed his archon's flat face. When Wu Xingxue wasn't smiling, the corners of his eyes drooped with the heaviness of his disdain. At a passing glance, he looked seriously unhappy.

Wasn't he smiling earlier? Why, oh why is he unhappy again?! Lest the archon take it out on him, Ning Huaishan bounced right back to Fang Chu without saying a word.

"What are you hopping back and forth for?" Fang Chu asked. He massaged his shoulder, where a bit of flesh had started to grow from the stump of his severed arm. The skin was pink from the fresh blood pumping through its veins. By comparison, his face was so pale it looked almost blue.

"I was just trying to find out what the archon was whispering about with his puppet. Look at him! Ever since he lost his memories, he barely talks to us anymore. What could he possibly have to talk about with a puppet?"

Ning Huaishan wondered what he'd done to lose the archon's favor, ignoring that he'd been trying to make his archon cry and beg for mercy half an hour ago.

Fang Chu bluntly pulled the rug out from under his argument. "Did he ever really talk with us *before* he lost his memories?"

"Guess you're right." Ning Huaishan considered Wu Xingxue one more time, then lowered his voice. "Chu, I just got the feeling that this puppet…hmm…doesn't seem quite right. Don't you think so?"

Fang Chu rubbed at his shoulder.

“No, I do not,” he said with ironclad certainty. The end result of their last suspicion had been disastrous. Only a fool would risk it again. Fang Chu gave Xiao Fuxuan’s profile a passing glance. “Do you know how long it usually takes me to recover from an injury like this?”

Ning Huaishan thought about it. The gravest he could recall of Fang Chu’s injuries had been decades ago, on the day he arrived in Nightgleam. When Wu Xingxue ordered him to carry Fang Chu from the black carriage, Ning Huaishan almost didn’t recognize him as human—some creature had bitten off both of his arms and a leg, and with his slashed-up face, he looked like nothing more than a blood-soaked ball of wadded cloth. Most people injured that severely would die, but Fang Chu seemed especially stubborn and refused to take his last breath.

Nightgleam never wanted for nefarious methods and malevolent, forbidden arts—even the consumption of raw human flesh and bone wasn’t out of the question as long as one was willing to do it. Flesh and bone could not regrow on their own, after all, and the body needed material to regenerate it.

Ning Huaishan often recalled that moment: Wu Xingxue had ordered him to toss Fang Chu into the pool for a soak. The black liquid that splashed out turned red when it landed on the snow at the pool’s edge. Beside the pool was a towering tree, but because it exuded such a heavy aura of death, no living thing dared to pause on its leaves and branches. Wu Xingxue’s residence was actually named after this tree; it was called Fly-On-By.

When the fiendlings placed Fang Chu in the pool, Wu Xingxue leaned against the great tree with his arms crossed and watched.

“Archon, we’re all set,” said one of the gathered fiendlings. “Everything is ready. We just need some humans.”

These fiendlings had started working at Fly-On-By before Ning Huaishan, and they’d been with Wu Xingxue quite a while by then, so they were attentive to a fault. They rubbed their hands together and spoke excitedly. “Nearest place we can get some is White Deer Ford. It’s easy enough to grab a boatload or two of them there. Let’s go right now.”

But Wu Xingxue seemed tired, his voice nasal with drowsiness. “It’s the middle of the night. Nobody’s going to be crossing White Deer Ford at this hour. My guess is that you won’t find it so easy to catch any.”

“That’s true. What should we do?”

“It’s simple.” Wu Xingxue straightened, walked to the blood pool, and used a palm move to push every last fiendling, one by one, into the pool. The living were good restoratives, but fiendlings would do just as well.

Inside the pool, Fang Chu remained unconscious, eyes closed and ignorant of all that occurred around him. From across a winding corridor, however, Ning Huaishan saw everything. A few bubbles rose to the pool’s surface, and the bloody cuts on Fang Chu’s face closed so rapidly that the healing could be tracked by the naked eye. Wu Xingxue stood by the pool to watch for a time before he washed his hands at a nearby bamboo water pump.

This memory was the root of Ning Huaishan’s fear of Wu Xingxue. For a long period after, he lived in fear that Wu Xingxue would toss him into the blood pool in a fit of pique to use him as a convenient source of nourishment. But he and Fang Chu had been pretty lucky. Though there was plenty of turnover at Fly-On-By, and most didn’t last long, the two of them had been with Wu Xingxue for decades and were still alive.

After only two days of soaking in the pool, Fang Chu went from a wad of bloodied cloth to hopping around on his own two legs. He often got hurt after that and seemed to be constantly losing limbs. Residents of Nightgleam seldom provoked each other, so if they ever got hungry or hurt enough to require nourishment, they’d leave the city to capture humans. Not Fang Chu. Once he developed a taste for fiends, he often plundered Nightgleam to feed himself. The only reason he hadn’t been put down was because the archon had his back.

In time, Fang Chu mastered regeneration to the point that his wounds closed rapidly on their own with or without anything to supplement his healing.

Ning Huaishan mulled all this over. “Sure, losing arms and legs is just business as usual for you. You usually grow them back in ten hours at most. Why’s it taking so long this—”

“I thought it was because I hadn’t eaten for a few days and that weakened me,” Fang Chu interrupted. “But now I think that’s not true. Look! As soon as we got to the valley, I started growing new flesh again.”

Fang Chu’s method of regeneration was a kind of infernal sorcery,

so certain things naturally hindered it—like being close to a celestial, where it was suppressed by their invisible celestial energy. This couldn't be the energy of mere clan initiates; it had to be the kind that came from Urbs Caelestia. His arm hadn't regrown because the celestial energy around him overpowered his infernal energy. His healing had improved now because they were in the accursed Valley of Laments.

Struck with an epiphany, Ning Huaishan turned to the so-called puppet and gave it a good once-over.

"Please don't go digging another grave, I beg you," Fang Chu said. "Just keep quiet and do what the archon says. I really don't want to focus on anything until I've grown my arm back."

"Wait a second. Shouldn't we tell him?"

Fang Chu looked at Ning Huaishan like he needed to regrow his *head*. "Do you honestly think the archon is dumber than me and you?"

"What, you're saying the archon already knows?"

He already fucking knows…but continues to swap secrets with his "puppet"?

Ning Huaishan found he had nothing left to say.

Thereafter, Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu didn't make a sound. They neither approached Wu Xingxue nor strayed too far, as docile as a pair of quails.

They were so obedient, in fact, that the clan initiates couldn't sense anything off about them at all, let alone that they were from Nightgleam. The initiates could not figure out whom the idol depicted no matter how hard they tried, so they decided to move on. They pointed their gold compasses all over the tomb, but the needles spun like headless flies. Before an audience of needy commoners and several anonymous master cultivators, the initiates were anxious not to embarrass themselves. They grew increasingly red in the face.

"What's with this spirit compass today?"

"It wasn't acting this way before!"

"Senior initiate, is it broken?"

"Nonsense! We checked it right before we left."

Wu Xingxue seemed lost in thought until he spoke. "What is this compass supposed to point to?" he asked the initiate with the reddest

face.

The initiate pointed at a smear of blood on the tip of the needle. “It’s looking for a soul. The compass will search for the soul of the person whose blood is on the needle.”

He shot a glance at the woman who lost her daughters. “That poor woman… After the names appeared on her daughters’ necks, she did what so many others had and tied them down to their beds so she could keep watch over them through the night. She was afraid she’d fall asleep without realizing it, so she tied the other end of each rope to her hand. She woke with a start at dawn to find the rope still in her hand but her daughters gone. The rope was drenched in blood, and that’s where the blood on this needle comes from. Although it’s true the compass is less accurate the longer it’s been since the victim’s blood was spilled, it still shouldn’t be behaving this way.”

Wu Xingxue patted him on the shoulder. “Try again and show me.”

The commoners stood behind him, watching with anxious faces. Visibly embarrassed, the initiate acquiesced. He pointed the compass at himself to reset it, then pushed it away. The gold needle spun, pointing madly at the stone walls around them before at last giving in and returning to the starting point.

“We were told that the other initiates who came in search of the missing had the same problem. The needle would spin in a circle and reset itself. Since they weren’t able to find any clues, they had no choice but to patrol quickly through the valley before heading back.”

“Never mind the compass anymore,” said the other two initiates, who turned to Wu Xingxue. “Do you more experienced gentlemen have any ideas?”

Wu Xingxue shook his head. He couldn’t remember anything. While he could instinctively protect himself, he still didn’t know how to do anything else. But he recalled Fang Chu crying, *“What’s this?”* just before Xiao Fuxuan and the others found them. Wu Xingxue had kicked Fang Chu at the time, so he remembered the rough location. Unless he was mistaken, Fang Chu had been standing right about…

There. He walked back to the spot and examined the odd-sized cavities in the wall. The upper ones held oil lamps, but the bottom one was a bit bigger—big enough to hide someone. Wu Xingxue stuck his

hand inside and felt a moist puff of air.

Noticing what he was doing, Fang Chu finally spoke up. “Oh yeah! Ar—er—Mr. Cheng, I saw something in there earlier! But then I got sidetracked, so I didn’t get a good look.”

Wu Xingxue was about to bend down to check when the reddest initiate scooted over. Perhaps to compensate for his compass blunder, he shrugged as if to say *I’m small enough,* took out an oil lamp, crouched, and crawled into the hole.

As soon as the initiate raised his lamp and shone its light into the cave, he spotted a figure crouching deep within. Its hair was tied up in two buns, and its paper-white face featured big hollow eyes that didn’t blink. It stared at him wordlessly.

“Fu—” The initiate bit his tongue and screamed inwardly as his soul practically flew from his body.

Someone patted him lightly on the back. “Why are you shaking?”

He was holding it together until the pat on his back, which made his hair stand on end. His scream was aloud this time as he scrambled back out into the open, crashing into the person behind him.

“Oh, just let me do it,” Wu Xingxue said testily, moving to his side to make room to pull the initiate out. As he crouched down, he spotted someone’s raised boot in his peripheral vision. The boot was tight, narrow, and black, and the leg above it appeared straight and strong. The foot met the rock face, and countless fractures radiated up the sides of the small bottom cavity. A clatter of rubble ensued, and the hole expanded to chest height. There was no further need to crouch. All one had to do to get a good look inside now was to raise his lamp. Saying nothing, Wu Xingxue swiveled and found himself looking into Xiao Fuxuan’s face.

Wu Xingxue had an inkling that there might not be much of a tomb left by the time they were through here.

How do I put this…? Is this how the Tianxiu Immortal usually *behaves?* he griped to himself.

Wu Xingxue bent his head and, shining the oil lamp into the hole, saw the same deathly white face. It struck him dumb for a moment; a figure who looked like that crouching in a place like this could frighten anyone. Fortunately, now that the hole was bigger, it was obvious what

they were seeing.

"It's a statue of an altar girl," he said. The reflection of pottery glaze was visible on the figure's cheeks.

Neither human nor supernatural at all, it was just a statue. Its face was painted snow white with two circles of blush dotting its cheeks. This was the kind of altar acolyte statue that usually sat on either side of a shrine, but this particular altar girl had a paper talisman stuck to her that read: *Celestial Emissary Zhao Qinglai makes this solemn offering.* The words were written in blood and a bit crooked, but not simply from bad handwriting. Rather, it looked as if the hand writing the words had been too stiff or insufficiently dexterous. Wu Xingxue read the name aloud as he straightened up.

"Zhao Qinglai?"

"Oh!" one of the clan initiates said. "That name sounds…familiar. Didn't a senior disciple mention it before? It's probably one of the invoked people."

The group grew grim-faced.

"How big is the altar girl?" another initiate asked. "Can you fit someone inside it?!"

"The ones that were invoked…couldn't be sealed inside the statues, could they?"

Xiao Fuxuan grabbed the top edge of the opening and bent down to examine the statue. He crooked two fingers, sending the paper talisman flying from the statue into his hand.

Alarmed, one of the initiates cried out, "You mustn't touch the talisman before we figure out what it's doing there!"

Only once he stopped yelling did he remember he was in the company of a rogue master cultivator far more experienced than the initiates. Presumably, this man knew what he was doing.

Sure enough, Wu Xingxue looked to an unharmed Xiao Fuxuan. "What kind of a talisman is it?"

Xiao Fuxuan flipped it over. "It's an animate talisman."

Wu Xingxue paused, then tried again. "Okay. Great. And what does 'animate' mean?"

Now it was Xiao Fuxuan's turn to be speechless.

“Oh, I know!” Yi Wusheng said. “I learned from a teacher when I was younger. He said that there was an arcane formation for summoning the gods. You would take an idol, set it down in the middle of an area, then get a couple of people to dress up as the altar boy and girl who serve the gods and make them stand in their proper places according to the formation. Next, you’d stick paper talismans to them with the name of the person making the offering. That’s how you’d call a god into the idol. I have no idea how the tradition got twisted, but it looks like it became a formation that could make an idol come alive. That’s why they call it an animate ritual.”

As he spoke, one quick-fingered initiate struck the altar girl statue with his sword. This sent shards of pottery clattering to the floor. The inside of the statue was covered in blood, and a stomach-churningly thick stench wafted out. It was clear that something had been placed inside the statue at some point.

“It’s so short. No one could possibly fit in there, right?”

“Maybe that’s why they had to be dismembered…”

Everyone thought of the invoked people, and the blood on the rope that suggested they were cut into pieces. As long as the head and limbs were severed from the body, it wouldn’t be difficult at all to stuff the remains in there. Still, there was nothing but blood inside the statue —so where had the person stuffed inside of it gone?

Chapter 20:
Putting on an Act

"GETTING INVOKED HERE is bad enough," mumbled the red-faced initiate. "To think that even their bodies were—"

The older one interrupted him with an elbow to the ribs. "That's enough."

Wu Xingxue eyed the initiates, then turned to find the commoners dreadfully pale and staring at the talisman in Xiao Fuxuan's hands as if entranced. One was shaking so badly he could barely remain upright. He tried to bend down and catch his breath, but as soon as the wadding in his coat compressed, the heavy scent of joss sticks filled the air again.

Everyone stopped talking, and the cluster of initiates flew over like a volley of arrows and grabbed the commoner under the arms.

"Don't mind him. Our junior is constantly blabbering on about all sorts of nonsense," said the reddest initiate. Fearing the strong scent of joss sticks would lure dangerous creatures to them, he tried to comfort them. "Maybe it's not that bad. Perhaps…perhaps…"

No matter how long he repeated it, he couldn't figure out what should follow "perhaps." He turned to Wu Xingxue to plead for help. He was so agitated that his redness now reached his ears.

What are you looking at me for? Wu Xingxue thought. *It's not like I can give you any comfort. If I jump in, I may scare them even more than your junior did.*

Instead of saying anything, he prodded Xiao Fuxuan. It only occurred to him after the fact that he might have done that far too flippantly.

Xiao Fuxuan paused his examination of the talisman to observe Wu Xingxue's prodding finger. Without a word, he next looked at the pleading initiate.

I beg you, please, say something, change the subject, get me out of this predicament, the poor initiate's face signaled.

In an act of mercy, the Tianxiu Immortal graced them with his

rarely used words.

"What are your daughters' first and last names?" he asked the woman.

Reading between the lines, Xiao Fuxuan's words conveyed this: *Your daughters are probably inside an acolyte statue just like this Zhao Qinglai. Their names will be on their statues, so tell me their names, and we'll see if we can find them.* Finding her daughters was the reason these commoners had dragged the disciples here, so he wasn't exactly *wrong* to ask, but it was still a merciless question.

From now on, you should keep your words even rarer! Wu Xingxue thought.

The initiate asking for help crumbled where he stood, his face gone quite green.

The woman crumbled too. She stumbled and pressed her hand against the rock wall, her expression hollow and her body shaking. The other two initiates rushed to her to pat consolingly at her back, but she couldn't bear even their light touch; each pat made her fold into herself a little more. Hunched over, she trembled for a long time before raising her face toward Xiao Fuxuan.

"My two little girls are still so young," she muttered hoarsely. "They're called… They're called…" She choked until she could recite the two nicknames. "One is called Ayuan. The other, Atai. Ayuan… Atai… W-wait for me, okay? Wait for me."

She softly repeated the names a few more times, her lips moving even as her voice faded to nothing. It was impossible to say whether she was trying to comfort herself or the still-missing souls of her two little girls.

Now that they had the names, the others stopped treating the search for bodies as taboo and started groping around the cavities in the walls.

They only realized then that the tomb wasn't just this one area but a long, meandering corridor. The occasional bends in the wide corridor hid the lamplight behind them, which at first glance made it seem like they were at the end of the tomb. Not so. The catacomb was built along the valley, so it was extensive, with many branching paths full of twists and turns.

After several such twists, everyone was a bit turned around. The initiates' geomantic compasses had stopped working entirely, and they passed through several junctions in a daze before noticing they were no longer following their compasses—they were following Xiao Fuxuan. But he, too, paused at several forked paths.

Wu Xingxue watched it all in silence until he finally asked, "Haven't you been here before?"

"Yes," said Xiao Fuxuan. He stopped and pressed his slender fingers to the stone wall, sending a tremor through it that loosed a rain of small stones.

"Why don't you know the way?"

Xiao Fuxuan stuck his fingers into a gap in the wall and blinked softly. "I didn't come in."

"You didn't come in? Why not?"

With just two fingers, Xiao Fuxuan turned aside an entire boulder blocking one cavity. It fell to the ground with a crash, kicking up a cloud of gray dust. Wu Xingxue squinted in the dust cloud as Xiao Fuxuan gave his low reply.

"I didn't want to."

An image flashed through Wu Xingxue's mind: a hazy, wintry night in the Valley of Laments; a tall silhouette standing in the fog and staring at the valley from across a narrow suspension bridge. Wu Xingxue froze. It was probably something he'd seen at some point, but he couldn't recall a single thing more. He returned to the present when the clan initiates started chattering.

"There's another statue!"

They'd already found two other acolyte statues, both empty but for the dried blood inside. These statues also bore talismans with the words *Celestial Emissary makes this solemn offering.* One was named Liu Zhi, the other Liu Mei. The names sounded like they belonged to other missing men and women.

Counting Zhao Qinglai, the first statue they'd found, this was their fourth. They'd developed a routine in which one initiate would draw his sword and slash at each statue until it fell to pieces. They did so once more…and revealed a body for the first time.

It was an adult male, folded up as if all of his bones were broken.

His neck was an open stump, and his head was in his lap. The initiates were so startled they backed away until their backs were pressed against the opposite wall.

"Why is this one still in there?" one of them whispered a moment later. "Has he turned into an abomination?"

The initiates thought to use their swords to check, but Yi Wusheng stepped forward and pressed the back of his finger against the skull. He shook his head.

"It's all right. Come on over," he said, the paper pressed firmly between his fingers.

Wu Xingxue took one look at the way the corpse was arranged and guessed it was the woodcutter who'd been invoked first. Indeed, the woodcutter's name—written in the same crooked, awkward manner—appeared on the paper talisman lying among shards of pottery.

It felt unreal to see firsthand that which had only been rumor. The woodcutter sitting before them was so unsettling it gave everyone goose bumps. The commoners downright refused to come any closer and huddled in the dark at a distance. The initiates stared at the woodcutter with pained expressions, yet they could not leave him in pieces here. Digging out a talisman, they carefully sealed it to his forehead and marked the location.

"We can come back for him after we find the others."

The group followed the stone wall deeper into the tomb, mulling over what they knew so far as they went.

"Why were the people in the first three statues missing, but this one was still there?" one initiate wondered.

"Maybe it's because the woodcutter went missing earlier?" another proposed.

"Since he went missing earlier, there wasn't much left of his soul, and he couldn't move any more once he was sealed in the statue. Those who went missing later had more of their souls intact, so the seal couldn't hold them."

What the invoked might do if the seal couldn't hold them was obvious: The starving would go looking for food, while those unwilling to accept their deaths might seek someone to take their place. Either

was possible. The unsteady glow of the oil lamps cast many shadows where dismembered bodies might already be lurking, waiting for the living to pass by. Even those who knew some thaumaturgy felt chills race down their spines at the thought.

Soon, they found another altar girl statue. Some of the paint was chipped away, giving it a mottled appearance. At first glance, its lips appeared to be smiling on one side and frowning on the other. With memories of the previous statue still fresh in their minds, the initiates faltered and did not dare draw their swords.

Suddenly, a gust of wind blasted right by them, and with a series of crisp cracking noises, the statue across the room broke open. This one was empty. There was nothing inside but blood and claw marks, as though the person sealed within had scratched at the clay in an attempt to escape…and, according to the shards littering the floor, succeeded.

The paper talisman amid the shards flew with a whoosh to land between Xiao Fuxuan's fingers. He unfolded it and saw the words *Celestial Emissary Gao E makes this solemn offering.*

"Gao E?" one initiate mumbled.

Noticing that he looked especially dumbfounded, Wu Xingxue asked, "What's wrong? What's got you so confused?"

"Gao E… Yes, Gao E…"

The initiate repeated the name several more times, then shook his head. "I was just trying to remember which family the name belonged to. I've heard it before, but I don't think it's one of the senior disciples. Argh, I can't remember! I've met too many relatives of victims lately. I'm getting the names all mixed up."

When he mentioned the relatives, some of the initiates shot Xiao Fuxuan a glance as though they wanted to ask him something but were too intimidated. Instead, they relied on the handsome and gentle-looking Yi Wusheng instead.

"Sir, since you're conversant in the history and usage of this animate talisman, do you know how many acolyte statues one would need if they really wanted to make an idol come to life?" one asked.

"Now, you mustn't take what I said about idols coming to life seriously," Yi Wusheng said. "That's just a twisted rumor. I've certainly never heard of anyone managing something like that in the past

century."

Calling it a summoning wasn't quite correct either. In essence, it served only to give the idol a hint of the god's spiritual energy. This allowed the summoner to pass a message through the idol to the actual god in Urbs Caelestia. Whether or not they could hear that message was a separate issue. It was an arcane formation that orthodox cultivation clans would never actually use. Such stories were useful for understanding folkloric traditions, but that was all. As a young man, Yi Wusheng had just so happened to love folk traditions. Sure, they were imprecise and lacked cohesion, but they were so fascinating that he remembered most of what he heard. He never imagined he would one day witness these folk traditions in reality.

"Anyway, it…should be thirty-three acolytes," Yi Wusheng recalled.

"Well, then that's it," one initiate said with a nod.

"If I'm remembering correctly, it was thirty-three households that were invoked. Wasn't it?"

"That's right. Counting the ones we met today, it just so happens to be exactly thirty-three households."

"Just so happens"? Wu Xingxue thought. He cut in, "Do you think you should go back and make sure you haven't overcounted?"

The last initiate to speak was taken aback and flushed. "Sir, please don't make fun of us. It was thirty-three altogether. How could we have gotten that wrong?"

"It doesn't add up," said Wu Xingxue. "One of the families lost *two* people, so if you counted *thirty-three* households, doesn't that mean there are *thirty-four* people?"

The initiates froze for a second as they clued in. The household that brought them to the Valley of Laments today was the household that lost two daughters: Ayuan and Atai. If they counted both, they were one over. Had they been under, they could have explained it away by saying the formation was incomplete. But with an extra, would this formation work?

"Why would there be one extra person?"

"Did we accidentally count someone twice?"

"Let's just ask them," the initiate said. He spun to ask the

commoners and came face-to-face with the woman who'd lost her daughters. Standing right behind him, no more than a hair away, her pitch-black eyes stared eerily at him.

Suddenly, the initiate remembered.

"Gao E!" he cried out.

At last, he realized that he hadn't heard the name Gao E from the senior disciples. Instead, it'd been the name *this* woman used to introduce herself when she'd come seeking help. She said her two daughters had been summoned to the Valley of Laments, and she needed their help to find them. But what if the ones who were invoked weren't her two daughters to begin with? What if the one who was invoked was *her*? In that case, thirty-three households would be the right number.

Four of the acolyte statues they'd found along the way were empty. The names on the statues sounded like they belonged to two men and two women—and the commoners who brought them to the valley were also two men and two women!

Gao E broke into a smile. Her pitch-black eyes curved like scythes, and her mouth peeked from the edge of her thick scarf to reveal that it, too, was pitch-black and sharp. The initiate's hackles rose as his flying sword left its scabbard. In an instant, the thick scarves wrapped around Gao E's neck unfurled, exposing the name written there. Her neck had been cut where the name was written, with only a narrow piece of skin left to keep it attached. As she moved, her head barely held on.

The initiate suddenly understood why the commoners were bundled in thick coats and why the wrappings around their arms and legs were tied so tight: to prevent them from falling apart. Freed from having to keep up the charade any longer, all four commoners dropped the act and picked a target. Three of them chose the three initiates, and the fourth surged in another direction.

When Wu Xingxue felt malevolent breathing behind him, he sighed softly. *You really know how to pick 'em.*

His fingers were already raised, but when he turned, his eyes met Xiao Fuxuan's and he hesitated. An instant later, the archon of Nightgleam, who'd killed a swarm of ghouls not too long ago, dropped his hands and ducked behind Xiao Fuxuan's back. He put his hands against Xiao Fuxuan's shoulders and pushed him forward a step.

“Help me, Lord Immortal! I’m scared.”

Xiao Fuxuan didn’t reply.

Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu gaped at their archon. *Don’t you think the two of us are way more scared?!*

Chapter 21:
Tomb

THE UNFORTUNATE man who'd chosen to attack Wu Xingxue was Zhao Qinglai, the very first of the celestial emissaries they'd found.

Hidden in his sleeves, Zhao Qinglai's nails were long and pointed, sharp as the tip of a sword. When they struck, they could carve deep channels into a rock wall. He went for Wu Xingxue because he looked highborn, slender, and completely unarmed. A mere glance pegged him as the kind of pampered heir who spent his days pleasure-seeking. He wasn't even wearing a scarf to shield himself from the wind and seemed to prefer curling himself over a hand-warming stove. His neck was completely exposed. One little scratch to that neck, and hot blood would spurt. He'd barely need to lift a finger!

Licking his canines, Zhao Qinglai raised his hand to aim for the neck—

Clang!

Zhao Qinglai heard the sound but didn't realize what had happened. The dead were bound to have slower reaction times than the living. By the time he registered the sound of a sword leaving its scabbard, the hand he'd raised against Wu Xingxue's neck was gone.

Innumerable sharp edges burst from the path of the audacious sword energy, sweeping across Zhao Qinglai's body like an inescapable winter gale and shredding his tight coat. As it fell in in pieces, the strength that kept him upright fled. Zhao Qinglai looked up with a start, his eyes bulging from their sockets. Wu Xingxue was nowhere to be seen, and someone else entirely blocked his way. The towering figure pushed the point of his sword against the ground and leaned on the hilt, watching Zhao Qinglai through downcast eyes.

"Come," he said in a cold voice.

A moment passed in silence. Zhao Qinglai couldn't possibly obey.

All at once, he collapsed to the floor, his howling cry rising from rough to sharp to high as a whistling scream. It rang through the tomb, colored with bitter resentment.

It wasn't just Zhao Qinglai. The coats of the three who attacked the initiates were also shredded by stray sword energy, and the initiates' flying swords struck nothing at all. With nothing left to do, they looked on as those who'd been overflowing with malice mere moments ago collapsed into heaps of torn cloth.

When the commoners were invoked to the Valley of Laments, they arrived chopped into pieces, their grudges as intense as their resentment was deep. Their immeasurable wrath should have made them fearsome abominations. Still, the initiates felt mostly pity and could not bear to watch the creatures rolling on the floor in disarray. Their scarred and bruised limbs had gone blue and stiff, and their heads twisted round and round as they struggled to keep their red eyes open.

They had once been living human beings. The initiates were still young, and their feelings were evident on their pale faces. Swords still in hand, they took several steps backward but didn't know what to do next. At long last, they turned helplessly to Xiao Fuxuan, the one who cut their assailants down.

As fourth hall elder of the Hua Clan, Yi Wusheng had been in plenty of similar situations, so he did not back away. However, his physician's instinct made the sight unbearable to him. He, too, instinctively looked to Xiao Fuxuan.

In the mortal realm, tales of Xiao Fuxuan were few and far between, perhaps because his interactions were typically with only the foulest of evildoers. He did not give blessings, mete out calamity, or act as the guardian deity of anything. He had no hand in fortune and heard no prayers. There were few portraits of him and even fewer idols, most enshrined in places like Twilight Fen, where ordinary people did not dare go. The portraits and idols of other Spirit Terrace celestials depicted gods smiling as gently as a spring zephyr caressing the world. No matter which idol it was nor how faithfully it resembled him, Xiao Fuxuan was the only god always shown with an icy expression, never a hint of a smile. No wonder commoners did not enjoy honoring him in their household shrines; the reunions and partings, joys and sorrows, and even the lives and deaths of ordinary folk never brought a single ripple to the silent springs of his eyes.

Now, as he swept his narrow-eyed gaze over a room filled with severed limbs and heads with open eyes that refused to rest in peace, there was no emotion on his face at all. When he was done evaluating

the scene, he raised his eyes again. The shrieks of the undead grew ever sharper and shriller, a sorrowful reverberation echoing within the tomb, but Xiao Fuxuan paid it no heed. He returned his sword intent to its scabbard.

In that moment, nearly everyone in the tomb felt a sense of unease—a sensation that arose from the powerful chill that emanated from Xiao Fuxuan's sharp blade. A blade tainted with blood would always be a murder weapon, an object few would dare to touch, even if cleansed and wrapped in a scabbard of jade beneath luminous, tranquil moonlight.

Only Wu Xingxue felt differently. Because his fingers were pressed against Xiao Fuxuan's back when he felled Zhao Qinglai and the others, Wu Xingxue knew Xiao Fuxuan's body had moved the merest fraction during the attack. The shift was so minuscule that Wu Xingxue didn't fully believe the immortal had moved until seeing that his body now blocked the disturbing sight of the commoners' scattered bodies and lolling eyes.

Although it seemed strange that anyone would think to cover the eyes of an archfiend who killed without batting an eye, Wu Xingxue became aware that, indeed, he did not wish to see. Perhaps his grand dream of Magpie Haven had changed his nature. The sight of the dismembered limbs disturbed him as much as the blood on his hands after killing the ghouls. Wu Xingxue was quiet for a moment, then his fingers moved down Xiao Fuxuan's back.

"Xiao Fuxuan."

"Mm-hmm," Xiao Fuxuan responded in a low voice.

Wu Xingxue leaned in to speak as Xiao Fuxuan turned his head like he wanted to hear him better. Suddenly, they were a little too close—so close Wu Xingxue could feel Xiao Fuxuan's breath tickling the tip of his nose.

Wu Xingxue pressed his lips together and shifted.

"What did you call me for?" Xiao Fuxuan asked quietly.

"Nothing. Something was on the tip of my tongue, but I forgot what it was."

Xiao Fuxuan raised his gaze, a sharp line etched in the fragile skin at the corner of his eyes.

“Well, um…thank you, Lord Immortal,” Wu Xingxue murmured.

Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu had kept their mouths shut all this time. On hearing their archon’s words of gratitude, they both felt like they were about to die of secondhand embarrassment.

Meanwhile, the severed limbs scattered on the floor had not stilled. They writhed as if they might put themselves back together and stand up again. Sharp fingernails clawed and scratched, screeching against the stone. The noise gave the clan initiates goose bumps.

One of them rubbed at his neck as he looked through his belongings.

“Where’s my bag of holding? Senior brother, did you bring one? Why don’t we put these, these…” The initiate could not bear to say a word like “abominations” in front of the slain commoners, their eyes still spinning in their sockets, mouths opening and closing as though they had something to say. “…these people in the bag? We can’t just leave them in pieces like this. Why don’t we put a talisman on them?”

“How are we supposed to put talismans on them? I didn’t bring that many!”

The woodcutter was at least somewhat intact, so it was enough to affix a talisman to prevent him from rising and doing harm. Faced with a mess of scattered body parts, however, it was impossible to guess where to do the same.

The initiate finally found his bag of holding and bent down to begin collecting parts. As soon as he did, one of the severed hands suddenly seized him by the wrist.

“Ahh!”

He shot to his feet, drew his sword, and slashed at the hand.

“I beg you, I beg you, young master…” a strained, rasping voice said.

The initiate responded by begging in turn. “Beg what?! I beg *you*, y-you…get your hand off me!”

Sharp nails dug into his flesh and held on tight. “I beg you, young master,” the voice rasped again. “I can’t stay here, I can’t stay. I really do have two daughters, I really do…”

The voice began to weep softly. Everyone recognized the one

talking was Gao E.

"I can't stay here. I need to find someone to take my place. I have to go home, I have to go home, I have to go home."

Her head rolling on the floor was a sorry sight. Her other hand skittered quickly across the floor and grabbed the nearest ankle, which belonged to Ning Huaishan.

Yi Wusheng instinctively spoke up to stop her. "Hey! Don't—"

Ning Huaishan's expression darkened, and something vicious flashed in his eyes. He was from Nightgleam, after all. He'd spent his life fighting to the top of a corpse heap, and he didn't possess the same humanity as initiates from a cultivation clan. Ning Huaishan crouched down, propped his elbows on his knees, and licked his canines with a smile far creepier than the abomination's.

"You're asking the wrong person, ma'am. Don't think it's so easy to strong-arm me just because I'm skinny. I've got one hell of a temper. If you put so much as one tiny little scratch on my ankle, I'll—"

"I beg you, I beg you, young man," said Gao E, gripping his ankle. "My two little girls are waiting for me. They're so very little! My husband's already dead and gone, and they won't survive if I'm gone too. They're too little to survive in a world like this. Please, I beg you…"

Yi Wusheng stepped closer to intervene, but not before Gao E's pointed fingernails broke the skin on Ning Huaishan's ankle. Blood ran along the pronounced jut of his slender bones. His fingers were already forming a claw, blue veins clearly visible beneath his pale white skin.

His vital force was ready to go, but he had yet to crush the reckless severed hand. For some strange reason, he kept listening to Gao E.

"My two girls are all I have, they're my everything. Please, I beg you."

"What's the use of begging me, ma'am?" Ning Huaishan said, his tone goading. "You're already dead. You can never go home again, and your two little brats are doomed to die too. I've seen people like you before. I've seen plenty—" He paused, then continued softly, "My mother begged for help just like you. You think it helped *me*? Of course not. It never does."

Yi Wusheng was just close enough to hear these words. Ning Huaishan was crouched, so while Yi Wusheng could not see the look on Ning Huaishan's face, he could see his clawlike fingers and the top of his head.

When he'd seen this fiendling decades earlier, he was fourteen and little more than skin and bones, looking as if one clumsy move could kill him. But there was an obstinate ferocity within his eyes.

Whose child is this, led astray by his own misdeeds? he'd thought then.

Many years had since passed, and though the fiendling was no longer skin and bones, he was still thin. Squatting like that, he made only a small bundle. His killing aura filled him with tension, yet as time passed, he didn't use it. Perhaps Gao E reminded him of how he started down the infernal path.

"It'll help. It'll help. There's always a way," Gao E sobbed. She refused to listen.

"Oh? And what way is that? Do you think you'd be in this many pieces if there was 'a way'? Just look! You gave so many offerings to those idols, but now that you're crying and desperate, which of the gods has come to answer your prayers? You just so happened to pick me, so let me teach you a lesson! You either figure out some way to carry on or you die. Don't beg, don't cry, just accept your—"

Before he could say the word "fate," someone kicked him from behind. It wasn't hard, but its softness was precisely what made it so infuriating. Ning Huaishan whipped his head around with murder in his heart—and came face-to-face with his archon.

What is it this time?!

Wu Xingxue tried to nudge Ning Huaishan aside with a foot. "You talk too much. What a nag! Your hand's been tense for ages, but you're doing nothing. Move aside."

Ning Huaishan didn't know where to start. "I can't move aside while she's clinging to my leg," he said, aggrieved. He turned away but kept his leg stuck out to show his archon.

Wu Xingxue looked at the severed hand with its sharp nails. "Earlier, you said there's a way to help. Maybe it's not baseless. Let me hear it. What is this 'way'?"

“Get someone to take my place! All they have to do is take my place!” Gao E cried, almost euphoric, her voice so shrill it cracked. “As long as someone can take my place, I can go home!”

“Oh. And you’re sure?” Wu Xingxue asked. “Did someone tell you that would work?”

The initiates jolted in surprise. Not everyone knew about the animate talisman; most people trapped in this arcane formation would just turn into abominations and follow their instincts to hunt for food. Even if they were subconsciously looking for a sacrifice to take their place, they would just wander the valley to await the arrival of unfortunate souls. But these few were special. They knew to disguise themselves and leave the valley to get someone. They even knew that the scent of joss sticks would conceal the stink of rotting flesh and prevent people from noticing they were abominations. It seemed less like the thoughtless instincts of a monster and more like they were following directions.

“Yes! There was, there was…” Her reaction was slower than that of the living, and she repeated those words over and over.

“Who?” everyone asked at once.

“A god,” Gao E whispered. “A god told me.”

A god? Wu Xingxue remembered Xiao Fuxuan saying there were plenty of gods who met tragic ends in Urbs Caelestia. Just like Yunhai, their idols were later installed here, as if this place were a giant tomb for celestials. As such, Gao E’s answer didn’t surprise him.

On the other hand, those who hadn’t heard Xiao Fuxuan’s story were still confused.

“How did a god tell you this, and how did you know he was a god? Did you see him?”

“No, no, it was a dream,” Gao E said. “A god came to me in a dream.”

The other body parts on the floor grew restless when they heard these words. Zhao Qinglai and the other two echoed Gao E: “Yes, it’s the same, it’s the same. He came in a dream.”

Though they all spoke at once and talked over each other, everyone got the gist.

When they'd been invoked to the Valley of Laments, it felt like a sleepwalking episode. They fought their bonds and tore themselves to pieces before folding themselves into the last few empty acolyte statues. They were unaware of their surroundings throughout, believing they were merely having a strange dream. They sat cross-legged in the alcoves to each side of a shrine, holding censers aloft as if they were real celestial emissaries. While reciting scriptures with the other emissaries, they suddenly saw a tall silhouette cross the threshold and enter the room.

The figure said: *Because your attachments to the mortal world remain intact and your worries are unresolved, you cannot be emissaries for the time being. I must trouble you to bring someone else. Once you return with a replacement, you may go home.* They woke to find themselves each sealed within an acolyte statue. Their terror in that moment was utterly unforgettable.

"What did this god look like?" Yi Wusheng asked.

But this time, try as they might, none of the commoners could answer. It was as if someone had put wards in place to silence them. This only made everyone more curious, but they were ultimately unable to get any meaningful response and had no choice but to give up that line of inquiry.

"Did he ever tell you what kind of people you should be looking for?" Yi Wusheng asked instead.

If all the commoners needed was someone to take their place, it was easy enough to find some widows or orphans on the city outskirts who would fit the god's criterion of being "unattached to the mortal world." Why risk going to a cultivation clan?

"He did," the commoners replied. "He said the shrine had everything it needed but for the lack of celestial energy in its four cardinal corners."

To provide the missing celestial energy, they'd presumed they needed cultivators. However, since they were merely peasants, they didn't dare seek out adepts or master cultivators. Instead, after some deliberation, they decided the easiest targets were the recently initiated. In this, they were rather fortunate. First, most people with invoked family sought help from cultivation clans, so their presence was not unusual. Second, following Tealspire's collapse, the more prominent cultivators of nearby clans either hadn't yet returned or had more

pressing matters to attend to. It was thanks to these circumstances that they managed to hook three initiates.

"Aren't you one short, then?" one initiate wondered aloud.

"We just thought we'd try to get as many as we could," said Gao E reluctantly. "If that wasn't good enough…we'd try again later."

Everyone fell silent at her words. The more the initiates considered it, the more terrifying it was in hindsight. The thought turned them quite green.

Yi Wusheng was conflicted. He darted his eyes to Wu Xingxue before turning to Zhao Qinglai. "Then how did you end up choosing him? Why Mr. Cheng?"

They said they were seeking someone with celestial energy. Aside from the three initiates, there were at least two more to choose from: Xiao Fuxuan and Yi Wusheng himself. Even if Xiao Fuxuan was intimidating, Yi Wusheng was nothing more than a soul remnant, less useful in a fight than the three initiates. Zhao Qinglai must have had a uniquely discerning eye to have skipped over Yi Wusheng to choose the most fiendish of them all. Yi Wusheng had merely made an offhand comment, but Zhao Qinglai mumbled an answer nonetheless.

"Out of everyone with celestial energy, he looked like the easiest to handle."

Yi Wusheng was shocked into silence. *Out of everyone with* what?

For a moment, he thought that he had misheard or Zhao Qinglai was blind.

After the commoners explained themselves, everything became clear for the others. No wonder the tomb was perfectly peaceful, with no sign whatsoever of an arcane formation having been set in motion. Despite the thirty-three filled acolyte statues, they still needed four people with celestial energy for each of the four cardinal corners—and the ones they'd gathered were insufficient.

One initiate turned to Yi Wusheng. "Does that mean the animate talisman actually works? Can it bring the idol back to life? Otherwise, why would this god be so serious about putting this formation together?"

"Um…" This was a question even Yi Wusheng couldn't answer.

Xiao Fuxuan suddenly spoke up. “It won’t work.” He held one of the animate talismans from the acolyte statues between his fingers. “This may be an uncommon talisman in the mortal realm, but it’s all over Urbs Caelestia.”

The implication of his words was clear: *What god from Urbs Caelestia would rely on useless junk like this to revive itself?*

“Could it be that someone from the mortal world did this because they didn’t know any better?” theorized one of the initiates.

Xiao Fuxuan’s lips parted, but before he spoke, another initiate shook his head and refuted this proposition.

“No, no, no. No way. Even if they didn’t know any better, who’d come to a weird place like the Valley of Laments to randomly put arcane formations in place? They’d have to be crazy.”

“Then why stick the animate talisman on them?”

“Yeah. We peeled it off easily enough, and so many of those acolyte statues were already shattered…”

They continued to mumble among themselves. When they mentioned the shattered statues, Wu Xingxue noticed Xiao Fuxuan’s brows crinkling. Xiao Fuxuan used the tip of his sword to push around the shards on the ground.

Wu Xingxue’s eyes tracked the sword to the inside of the altar girl statue that once held Gao E. It was covered in bloody claw marks. He stared at the bloodstains for a moment, sensing that something was off. Once the commoners transformed into abominations, their bladelike nails were so sharp and hard they could tear through iron like it was mud and leave deep channels on rock. Yet they couldn’t break through an acolyte statue made of clay and made a mess of the inside instead? Besides, what happened to the commoners was recent, but the acolyte statues themselves looked old—perhaps as old as the tomb’s idol. Why were the statues placed in the tomb long before their inhabitants or the animate talismans?

With a swift flick of his sword, Xiao Fuxuan flung one of the shards into his hand. Wu Xingxue followed his gaze. Beneath the crisscrossing bloody marks was a tiny seal, almost entirely worn away and illegible.

“What’s that?” Wu Xingxue asked.

“I can’t tell.” Xiao Fuxuan paused. “An offering rune, probably.”

Of course, Wu Xingxue had never heard of that. “What’s an offering rune for?”

“It’s for the reception of worship.”

“Lord Immortal, does it look like I understood what you just said?” Wu Xingxue asked with a laugh.

Xiao Fuxuan seldom gave detailed explanations for minor details such as this, but seeing Wu Xingxue smiling at him, he eventually continued. “In the past, celestials left offering runes on their idols. The runes allowed them to collect the incense burned in offering from every shrine in the mortal realm.”

Wu Xingxue recalled Xiao Fuxuan’s tale of how Yunhai didn’t receive enough offerings and was eventually deposed from his position as an immortal and struck down.

“So offerings are like food to the gods, and they’d all die without them?” asked Wu Xingxue.

“Almost all,” Xiao Fuxuan corrected him.

“There are exceptions?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Such as?”

Xiao Fuxuan took a moment to answer. “Me.”

“Ah,” Wu Xingxue said quietly. It made sense. Xiao Fuxuan became a celestial through invocation and did not fall under the jurisdiction of the Twelve Immortals of the Spirit Terrace. He was also in charge of penance, which had nothing to do with commoners of the mortal realm, so it didn’t seem strange that he was an exception.

Wu Xingxue asked something else instead of inquiring further. “What’s the point of leaving an offering rune on an acolyte statue? This tomb is deep beneath the earth, so it’s not like anyone is coming here to worship. Whose offerings are they receiving?”

As he said this, he thought of the everlasting lamps burning quietly along the rock walls. He suddenly got the feeling that whoever dug this tomb and left the acolyte statues wasn’t after offerings. Like the ever-glowing lamps, the statues offered nothing more than quiet,

enduring companionship.

There were several as-yet-unbroken joss sticks among Gao E's tattered clothes. Wu Xingxue bent down and extracted three, then took an oil lamp down from the wall and lit them. He held them by the broken piece of pottery, letting them burn awhile. The swirls of delicate blue smoke suddenly swerved in a single direction.

One of the initiates noticed. "What is the smoke doing?" He raised a hand to feel around. "There's no air current in here right now."

"Could it be pointing the way?"

They met each other's eyes and decided to follow the smoke at once.

They passed more wall cavities along the way, inside which they found almost twenty more acolyte statues. Each held the body of someone who'd met a violent end. Every last one had scratched and struggled, leaving the statue interior a mess of crisscrossing bloodstains —and in each Xiao Fuxuan found a broken shard bearing a scratched-up offering rune hidden beneath lines of blood.

They walked for a long while before Yi Wusheng muttered, "We're probably at the end of the vall—"

While he spoke, the group followed the smoke past a junction and into a massive circular vault full of towering idols. Yi Wusheng was too stunned to finish his sentence, and the initiates' chatter ended in gasps. They'd visited ordinary shrines before, but none with idols this tall. Most idols were graven images carved from wooden or stone pillars, and some city gates and piers might have had one or two that were quite tall, but they'd never seen anything rivaling this veritable forest of colossi. The oppressive atmosphere sealed their lips, and though they averted their eyes, they could not stop themselves from glancing back.

"These idols are just like the one near the entrance. I don't recognize a single one," said one of the stunned initiates. "I've never seen so many strange idols in one place. Sir, what about you? Do you recognize them?"

Yi Wusheng tilted his face to examine the idols one by one. He shook his head. "No, I don't recognize any of them."

Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu could've retched for three lifetimes

under the weight of the idols. Queasy as could be, they instinctively swallowed.

"Do you really want to vomit here?" Wu Xingxue said softly.

Ning Huaishan held his mouth closed and gulped down the wretched storm raging in his stomach. It took him a while to reply. "Are you saying we *shouldn't*?"

Fang Chu was already hunched over, his arm slung over Ning Huaishan's shoulder. He suppressed the urge to puke until even his eyes turned green.

"Archon. I've wanted to ask you something for a while now. How come the idols don't seem to affect you?" Then, overcome with nausea, Fang Chu buried his head in Ning Huaishan's shoulder lest he disrespect the archon by throwing up.

"If you barf on me, you'll regret it. I'm serious," Ning Huaishan warned.

Wu Xingxue was completely unfazed. "How am I supposed to know why they don't affect me?"

Ning Huaishan turned his green face toward Wu Xingxue. *Oh! Right, he doesn't remember a thing—even if he once knew, he probably forgot. Bleh. Shit!*

The two fiendlings couldn't take it anymore. They waved frantically, then dropped to their hands and knees and fled outside, leaving Wu Xingxue alone to make sense of it all.

Confounded, he returned his focus to Xiao Fuxuan. "You said that Yunhai wasn't the only god in this tomb who met a tragic end. Am I correct to assume you were referring to these idols?"

Xiao Fuxuan faced the idols without any apparent surprise, looking closely at each and every one. Although he seemed to know who should be here, he gazed intently as if searching for something among them. When he finished observing them all, he averted his eyes.

"Yes," he said calmly. "All of them."

That's odd. Wu Xingxue couldn't stop second-guessing himself. If the people the idols depicted were cast down to the mortal world like Yunhai and forgotten, then they were no longer gods. If they were no longer gods, they should have no effect on fiendlings like Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu; after all, when they saw Yunhai's idol earlier,

neither had given much of a reaction.

He was about to ask Xiao Fuxuan about this when he heard one of the initiates exclaim, “There’s something written on the pedestals!”

Wu Xingxue’s gaze strayed down to the words carved into the pedestals at the idols’ feet: *Sang Feng, Numen of Mount Immovable… Huo Ge, Numen of Snowmelt Tarn… Meng Gu, Numen of the Barrows…*

As he traversed the forest of idols, Wu Xingxue skimmed all of the names and titles written below. Each had the name of the god and the place over which they once guarded. Suddenly, a sense of déjà vu stopped him in his tracks—as if these tragically fallen gods might not be so unfamiliar. Like he’d once seen these very faces engaged in conversation before they’d disappeared, never to be seen again.

“There are markings behind them!” another voice cried, pulling Wu Xingxue from his thoughts. He rounded the two idols nearest to him and saw there *were* markings behind them, mirroring the positions of the names and locations written in front. Wu Xingxue bent down to shine an oil lamp on the markings and discovered they were identical to the ones inside the acolyte statues.

“They really are making offerings to these idols,” Wu Xingxue murmured to himself. He counted them. There were thirty-three exactly, no more and no less—one for each acolyte statue. Perhaps the person who built this celestial tomb hoped that, although they were no longer gods, they would not feel so alone with acolytes resting at their sides—but in that case, it made no sense for the commoners to be invoked here. Why would they stuff themselves into the statues or scratch out the offering runes within? Instead of having a consoling effect on those inside the statues, the offering runes made them restless and angry.

There were few oil lamps inside the circular vault, which grew darker and harder to navigate the deeper into it one walked. Wu Xingxue could almost perceive a silhouette fading into the shadows beyond the forest of idols, so blurry he could barely make it out. It was a set of flying eaves—a pavilion? A jade pavilion?

He imagined what might have existed in Urbs Caelestia, where the fallen celestials once lived. Tombs in the mortal realm were often decorated to look like the former homes of the dead. Lifting the oil lamp, Wu Xingxue walked forward to see what it was, but as soon as he raised a foot, Xiao Fuxuan pulled him back by his wrist.

“Don’t take another step,” said Xiao Fuxuan, his hand on Wu Xingxue’s shoulder and his resonant voice right next to his ear.

“What is it?”

“There’s an arcane formation here.”

“Arcane formation?”

“Mm-hmm,” Xiao Fuxuan said. “I just had a look around. These thirty-three idols are not placed here haphazardly. They’re in specific positions that compose an arcane formation.”

Just as he finished speaking, the vault echoed with the hoarse screams and mournful gasps of Gao E and the other commoners. Wu Xingxue whipped around at the sound. Something had beckoned the severed body parts to crawl rapidly toward the gloom, where they now screamed and writhed. The stink of blood filled the room. Wu Xingxue could almost see the red droplets flying toward him, but with Xiao Fuxuan’s immobilizing grip on his wrist, he could only squeeze his eyes shut and turn his head away. Suddenly, the weight lifted from his shoulder and Xiao Fuxuan lowered his slender hand a breath’s distance from Wu Xingxue’s nose, blocking him from the spatter of blood.

Xiao Fuxuan coolly shook off the beads of blood, then tossed an oil lamp into the patch of darkness. A loud roar rose as the gloom ignited with bright white, blue-tinged flames so tall that they scorched the ceiling. Scalded by the flames, Gao E and the other commoners woke screaming from their trances and retreated in a rustle of limbs. They did not try to enter the darkness again.

Yi Wusheng set aside his habitual politeness to yell over their awful screeching. “What are you running over there for?!”

“There’s a voice,” Gao E replied. “I heard the god’s voice again!”

Was this the same god who’d come to them in a dream and told them the cardinal corners needed a touch more celestial energy? Wu Xingxue squinted and stared through the bright blue flames until, as the firelight weakened, he saw what was hidden in the dark: a pavilion carved from granite. It looked more like someone’s residence than a shrine or a place of worship; there was a bed, a changing screen, stone railings, and even an elevated corridor like some jade pavilion in Urbs Caelestia. But this pavilion adjoined a high platform covered in carved runes.

The runes were hard to read, but there was a plaque above the jade palace where something had once been written. For some reason, the words had been chiseled away, and only a single corner of the plaque was left. The rest had fallen to the floor, where one could faintly see the word *Breeze*.

Seat of Spring Breeze? The words flashed through Wu Xingxue's mind.

"Seat of Spring Breeze," said Xiao Fuxuan at the same time. Wu Xingxue could not tell which of them had thought of it first.

Wu Xingxue stared at the high platform, then returned to those flying eaves. "What is this place?"

It took Xiao Fuxuan a long time to answer. "The Altar of Deposed Gods."

"I see," Wu Xingxue said softly.

Presumably, every deposed god once stood on a rune-covered altar. How did a place where gods were banished end up with a name like "Seat of Spring Breeze"? It squandered the spring breeze on nothing.

The reason for building the Altar of Deposed Gods was plain as day; one viewing was enough to see it served as a warning. Wu Xingxue thought of the thirty-three idols in the circular vault—their proximity made the Yunhai idol seem conspicuously out of place in its isolation.

The numerous idols in the circular vault had to have some celestial power left, since they'd induced gagging and vomiting in Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu. That power must have come from the sustained offering of the acolyte statues. Conversely, the fiendlings had no reaction whatsoever to the Yunhai idol. It was clear against whom this Altar of Deposed Gods served as a warning: Yunhai was the one truly severed from the Book of Gods.

According to Xiao Fuxuan, fiends devoured Yunhai in the Valley of Laments. His death lured Hua Xin to the valley to slaughter the fiends and build this tomb to enshrine Yunhai's idol; the other idols were gradually added later. The story had perplexed Wu Xingxue. If Yunhai and Hua Xin shared such a deep master-disciple bond, why would he enshrine his dearly departed disciple underground where no mortals could visit? It probably wasn't purely for consecration.

The bright blue flame still burned like a barrier between them and the Altar of Deposed Gods. In that light, the altar seemed like a burial mound pinning down what was sealed within it. Considering the fallen plaque, something must have disturbed the burial mound before.

In the flickering firelight, the eyes of the thirty-three towering idols almost appeared to be moving.

“Senior brother,” said one of the initiates. “Why do I feel like those idols are looking at us?”

“Am I imagining things? That idol looks like it’s turned a little.”

“It’s probably just a trick of the light.”

Beneath the thirty-three idols, the seams interconnecting the stone tiles seemed to glow dimly as though the arcane formation was shifting.

“Xiao Fuxuan, you said that these idols formed an arcane formation,” Wu Xingxue said. “What does the formation do?”

Xiao Fuxuan watched the faint glow crisscross the floor beneath them. “It subdues fiends…or soul remnants. It…ensures they never again see the light of day.”

Chapter 22:
Offering Rune

IT WASN'T JUST XIAO FUXUAN who understood; anyone with knowledge of arcane formations recognized this as a grand formation.

Like a hurricane, every formation had an eye containing its crucial keystone or its most essential spiritual talisman. A keystone always bore a seal clearly identifying its formation's architect, whereas a spiritual talisman would explain its purpose. To prevent collateral damage, grand seals of suppression included spiritual talismans inscribed with the names of their targets. When encountering an arcane formation, cultivators always looked for the eye.

Yi Wusheng studied the flowing light crisscrossing the floor and frowned. "The eye of this formation is…right over there."

The initiates looked up to find him pointing at nothing other than the Altar of Deposed Gods, beyond the bright blue flames.

"Um…"

"Isn't that way too obvious? Could it really be right there?"

"Honestly, I noticed that as well, but I thought it was just a diversionary tactic."

None of the initiates dared to believe it. Most formation architects put serious effort into obscuring a formation's eye to prevent tampering. Whoever built this grand formation seemed to have done the opposite. Any keen observer could see that its eye was the Altar of Deposed Gods. Why would the formation's architect have made the eye so obvious? It was so outrageous they refused to believe it and assumed instead that they'd missed something or miscalculated.

For the time being, no one dared to make any hasty moves. Some grand formations were so delicate that any slight alteration—even the smallest movement of pebble or petal—was akin to turning the world upside down.

"What if that's what the architect wanted us to think?" one initiate suggested quietly.

Yi Wusheng shook his head. "No one would take a risk like that

with a formation this large."

"Sir, you're quite right. If it's set up this way, the architect must be a gambler at heart."

"It was probably set up this way because it *had* to be," Yi Wusheng replied.

But *why* did it have to be set up that way? Was the architect's spiritual core so diminished he lacked the time or energy to hide the eye properly? Was he interrupted while setting the eye and forced to wrap things up in haste?

While they racked their brains to no avail, a heavy thud exploded from the center of the circular vault.

Bang!

Then another.

Bang!

With a start, they turned to the sound of the explosion. It came from the Altar of Deposed Gods.

Bang!

At the third thud, the jade pavilion and altar began to shudder. The plaque's sole remaining corner fell off completely, smashed into the stone steps before the jade pavilion's main hall, and crumbled to dust. If the jade pavilion and the altar were an exquisite sarcophagus, then this shuddering could only mean that whoever was sealed inside was now awake and hammering their way out.

Bang!

At the fourth thud, the three initiates leaped into the air.

"This is bad! Watch out!"

They readied for battle, drawing their swords and folding their fingers into arcane gestures. Countless glowing white swords surrounded them on all sides and pointed at the altar. They would attack at the slightest sign of trouble. Suddenly, a droning sound rose all around them, and an astral wind materialized out of nowhere. It swept toward the Altar of Deposed Gods with the tremendous force of a million sharp blades.

"It's the formation!"

“The formation is active!”

The grand formation within the circular vault brightened, activating with a hum as the Altar of Deposed Gods shuddered. There was no reasoning with the formation now; it sent out countless killing strikes as if totally indifferent to the living people caught within. With no warning whatsoever, an aura of crushing dominance fell upon them with the force of Mount Tai.

A loud rumble racked the vault in a ceaseless echo. Crushed rock exploded outward, and the shivering altar jammed deeper and deeper into the earth. What the people around it faced was even worse.

“Ahh!”

Gao E and the other commoners let out ear-piercing screams as the tremendous pressure pulverized and flattened the bones inside their severed limbs. The younger initiates gripped their swords in both hands and held them aloft to try and block the descending force that pushed down and hunched them over. With a splutter, the eldest succumbed to the pressure, and blood gushed from his mouth.

Yi Wusheng wanted to help but could barely hold himself together. A single round of the formation’s aura destabilized his soul remnant. With a tearing sound, the force nearly ripped from his face the black cloth that kept his soul sealed. Another tug and it would press the celestial breath right out of him, making this vault his tomb.

Abruptly, as the aura was about to strike a second time, everyone heard the clear, high-pitched whistle of a sword being drawn from its scabbard. A light flashed above their heads, and a barrier of phantom swords blocked the crushing aura’s coming blow. Sparks flew when the aura glanced off the phantoms, the impact reverberating throughout the valley.

Flinching, those below the phantom sword barrier shut their eyes. When they opened them once more, they were amazed to see the phantom swords were as immovable as boulders. Simultaneously, thousands of identical phantom swords encircled them tightly. The grand formation continued to attack but could not breach the cage of phantom swords.

It was Xiao Fuxuan’s sword intent.

The initiates leaned on one another to remain upright. After coughing out the blood caught in their throats, they turned to Xiao

Fuxuan to thank him for lending a hand and noticed the vaguely discernible *Mian* imprinted on the phantom swords. The initiates could hardly believe it. They hesitated, still processing, before they whipped their heads toward Xiao Fuxuan so violently they almost unleashed more mouthfuls of blood.

"Senior brother," the youngest one whispered. "I memorized *The Book of Legendary Swords*."

"Who hasn't?" his senior brother replied.

The two most widely read picture books among initiates of any cultivation clan were *The Book of Gods* and *The Book of Legendary Swords*. Though the initiates could recite them backward and forward, they found the knowledge useless now that they needed it most. Of the thirty-three idols inside the circular vault, they hadn't recognized a single one—nor had they recognized the Tianxiu Immortal himself. The celestial had been with them all along, and yet they were so clueless they'd spent half the day simply calling him "sir."

"His portrait in *The Book of Gods* doesn't resemble him at all," mumbled one initiate. "Wait, didn't the Lord Immortal perish?" He was baffled and full of more questions. *Can he just quietly come back to life like that? Can they live again even after they die?*

His senior wasn't doing much better. "No idea. Check his neck, though. It doesn't have his name marking like in *The Book of Gods*."

"Is it possible that he's not the true Tianxiu Immortal?"

"How would I know?" His senior considered it more and reached a conclusion. "Well, if he wasn't genuine, he wouldn't be able to use the Sword of Absolution, right? Celestial swords can only be wielded by their masters."

They turned and carefully examined the sword strapped to Xiao Fuxuan's waist. It was identical to the one depicted in *The Book of Legendary Swords*.

Every last sword that belonged to an immortal of Urbs Caelestia was listed in *The Book of Legendary Swords*, and nearly all were named. Yet no one knew the name of Xiao Fuxuan's sword, so they referred to it by the name written on its blade.

According to legend, Xiao Fuxuan's sword did have a true name, but not one he'd given it—and no one could say where the legend

originated from, let alone whether it was true.

Looking at the golden phantom swords that encircled him protectively, Wu Xingxue was surprised by a feeling that such an outstanding sword *should* have a name. He was about to ask Xiao Fuxuan about it when the Altar of Deposed Gods juddered violently, as though whatever was buried beneath was more agitated than ever.

The grand formation began to move rapidly until the entire tomb—the entire valley—quaked from the force of restraining whatever was subdued beneath the altar. They all felt a buzzing in their heads. The thirty-three idols spun slowly to face the Altar of Deposed Gods like they were silently besieging it. When the unrest at the altar reached its zenith, an indistinct voice echoed within the tomb. Like a gale crossing a deep trench, the voice spoke a name:

"Yunhai, my disciple. Be quiet, Yunhai. Enough of this nonsense. Yunhai…"

Everyone stilled. The voice carried the grand formation's aura of crushing dominance. Its strength increased by degrees with each word it spoke—until the altar's agitated vibrations came to a definite stop.

"Whose voice is that?" a dazed initiate asked.

"It's Mingwu Hua Xin…" said Yi Wusheng. He'd recognized it instantly. As a descendant of the Hua Clan, Yi Wusheng had listened to many of Hua Xin's lectures.

Now that Hua Xin had spoken his name, there was no longer any doubt who the formation was here to subdue. Rumors said that Yunhai was wholly consumed by fiends whom Hua Xin had later annihilated. Clearly, that wasn't the whole story. Instead, it appeared that Yunhai had become a fiend himself. Because Hua Xin could neither kill nor release him, he instead set a grand formation to ensure Yunhai would never again see the light of day, entrapping him here for centuries.

Although the altar went still following the naming of *"Yunhai, my disciple,"* they did not let down their guard.

One initiate stared fixedly at the altar, not even daring to blink. "Has it been subdued?"

"Hard to say," said Yi Wusheng.

"Did it grow agitated because we came into this place? Did it catch a scent of the living and get hungry?"

“No idea. Perhaps.”

Wu Xingxue listened to their discussion. As he mulled it over himself, he heard Xiao Fuxuan speak quietly.

“Don’t move.”

Wu Xingxue did as he was told. “What is it?”

“Lower your head,” Xiao Fuxuan replied.

The back of the neck was one of the body’s weak points, and no one would casually expose it to another. Wu Xingxue instinctually narrowed his eyes but gathered himself and lowered his head as instructed. When Xiao Fuxuan’s fingers touched the back of his neck, Wu Xingxue’s muscles tensed. It was a peculiar sensation. Fortunately, Xiao Fuxuan swiped his fingers over the spot only once before withdrawing his hand.

Wu Xingxue rubbed at the back of his neck to cover up the residual heat. “What? What’s wrong?”

Xiao Fuxuan’s brow was creased. “There’s a new marking there.”

Wu Xingxue’s rubbing stopped. “A marking? What sort of a marking?”

His first thought was of Yi Wusheng, Hua Zhaoting, and the others afflicted in the Valley of Laments. They were all marked on the backs of their necks, but by the time the marks were discovered, they’d been scratched beyond recognition, leaving them impossible to decipher.

Overhearing bits of this conversation, Yi Wusheng hurried over. “A mark behind the neck? Is it the same one I had?”

Even though Wu Xingxue could not see the marking, it wasn’t hard to guess. “We’re in the Valley of Laments, and it’s in the same spot, so I assume, yes.” The original appearance of the obscured markings had been revealed.

“It’s an offering rune!” Yi Wusheng exclaimed.

“An offering rune?” Wu Xingxue asked. “You’re telling me that the marking on my neck is the same as the ones inside the acolyte statues?”

“Correct.” Yi Wusheng stared blankly for a considerable time, rubbing at the crisscrossing scars on the nape of his own neck. “To think that it’s an offering rune…”

Xiao Fuxuan checked the backs of everyone else’s necks.

“Do they have them?” Wu Xingxue asked.

“No.” His expression had gone cold.

“So it’s just me? How unfair,” Wu Xingxue grumbled. He wondered what it was he’d done that nobody else had and realized there was only one thing—lighting the incense. He was the one who’d lit the three joss sticks. Although his intention had been to examine the acolyte statues, he had inadvertently made an offering.

If the incense offering was the reason for the rune’s appearance, it might explain how so many people passing through the Valley of Laments decades ago had become afflicted. They must have stopped in the shrine at the valley’s entrance to pray for an uneventful journey and offer incense to the valley’s long-deceased numen. Sealed beneath the valley, Yunhai had generously accepted them as his worshipers.

“Why an offering rune?” one initiate asked. “Don’t the gods only use them to accept offerings?”

In a daze, Yi Wusheng began to speak. “By the same logic…if a god used the rune, then any offerings made to an idol or celestial emissary so marked would go to that god. And if a fiend were to use it…”

Everything devoured by those marked with the rune would also go to the fiend. Yi Wusheng suddenly found the entire situation both lamentable and laughable. He and Hua Zhaoting had spent more than twenty years struggling to survive, and all the while they’d acted as acolyte statues, unaware they were providing offerings for the one buried beneath the Valley of Laments.

“Aha!” the initiate cried, digging through his silken pouch with a nod toward Wu Xingxue. “Good thing we brought Dreamsbane with us. If you get a marking like that, you can take one right away to dispel it.”

Wu Xingxue took the round Dreamsbane pill between his fingers and stared at it curiously before handing it back. “I don’t need it. You keep it. It’s a waste to give it to me.”

“What do you mean you don’t need it?!” said the panicked initiate. “If you don’t take it, a fiend will possess you. You’ll become an archfiend!”

“I’m afraid there won’t be any such possessions or transformations,” Wu Xingxue replied casually.

“What? Why not?!”

Wu Xingxue flashed him a smile. “Because I was an archfiend to begin with.”

Chapter 23:
The Reckoning

BEHIND HIM, Xiao Fuxuan grabbed Wu Xingxue's shoulder.

"Wu Xingxue!" Though he kept his voice down and spoke directly into Wu Xingxue's ear, it was clearly a warning—yet it was tinged with a tiny trace of helplessness.

Wu Xingxue turned and met Xiao Fuxuan's downcast—and therefore less piercing—gaze. It occurred to him that it was a good thing the Tianxiu Immortal seldom visited the mortal realm. Even if he didn't care for chitchat, his face alone could reel in many young women.

Wu Xingxue suddenly got an idea.

"Did I misspeak? This body belonged to an archfiend to begin with, and I'm guessing it'd be difficult to possess, especially considering the pilgrimage it inspired at the Hua estate. The Dreamsbane is terribly hard to come by. We should save it if we can. Wouldn't you agree, Lord Immortal?"

Xiao Fuxuan's eyes widened slightly, but he said nothing. Apparently, the Lord Immortal didn't think much of Wu Xingxue's justification. His lips opened and closed, then he stiffened and looked away. Wu Xingxue supposed he must not have found anything fit to say.

"I also think you scared that initiate," Wu Xingxue added under his breath.

What?

It was hard to describe the look on the Tianxiu Immortal's face as he listened to this nonsense.

Wu Xingxue may have been amused, but the poor initiate was about to lose it. It was bad enough to hear Wu Xingxue admit he was an archfiend, but hearing Xiao Fuxuan speak the name *"Wu Xingxue"* nearly made his soul flee his body. Just absorbing those three syllables was like being struck square on the head by lightning of the five elements that split his scalp and launched his spirit into the ether.

Fortunately, the initiate was standing beside Yi Wusheng, who

could not bear to watch this go on. After Xiao Fuxuan had prodded him with his sword and commanded him to swallow his words, he'd crafted a rather reasonable explanation that he'd frequently rehearsed in his mind. It would prove quite useful in comforting others.

Grabbing the initiate to steady him, Yi Wusheng recited the well-honed lie about the *real* greater archfiend succumbing to torture in the Northern Domain of Tealspire, thereby enabling an innocent living soul to accidentally possess him.

The initiate was skeptical. He was about to ask how a mere mortal could accidentally possess an archfiend like Wu Xingxue when an explosion rattled through the valley. Startled, everyone turned to see the once-calmed Altar of Deposed Gods covered in fissures. It seemed that whatever lay beneath it had gathered its strength to erupt with one heavy blow.

A fiendish black aura seeped through the fissures, instantly chilling the circular vault. It was like standing in an ice cellar. Covered in goose bumps, the initiates shivered uncontrollably while Gao E and the other commoners twitched on the ground, their broken bones clacking.

"What happened to the formation?" the initiate murmured. "How come it seems to have…stopped?"

He turned his attention to the thirty-three idols. Only then did he notice the silence in the vault—Hua Xin's distant, repeated chanting of *"Yunhai, my disciple"* had vanished. The domineering aura that had strengthened by degrees seemed to have consumed the last of the formation's celestial force, and the flowing light limning the stone tiles dimmed until the crisscrossing pattern was no more. That was when everyone heard the sound of crumbling stone.

The initiates' attention snapped to the Altar of Deposed Gods, assuming it would be the first thing to collapse. But the sound didn't come from the altar; it came from the idols. Great, jagged cracks began to appear on the towering forms. Wu Xingxue scanned them and discovered that the fissures began at the offering rune on the pedestals before rapidly spreading to the crowns of the idols' heads.

Boom!

The first idol collapsed.

Boom!

Then the second.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The third, fourth, and fifth…

The collapse of just one of the towering idols, let alone dozens, was enough to shake the earth. Dust and debris flew in every direction, filling the vault. Without Xiao Fuxuan's phantom swords to shield them, they would've been buried alive. In the blink of an eye, most of the thirty-three idols crumbled. Wu Xingxue walked through the cloud of dust and found that only four idols remained. All four were covered in fissures and barely holding together.

"It just so happens to be four, no more and no less," he muttered. The air was too thick for him to see clearly, but he ventured a guess that the four remaining idols consisted of two men and two women. Sure enough, the initiates walking ahead of him began to cry out as they read the names of the last four idols.

"Two male celestials and two female celestials!"

Wu Xingxue glanced at Gao E and the other three commoners, finally understanding why they had been invoked: Every acolyte statue inside the tomb corresponded to one of these thirty-three idols, one acolyte per idol offering enough celestial force to keep the grand formation running. As long as the idols stood, the arcane formation was active—and beneath the Altar of Deposed Gods, Yunhai would never find peace. Yunhai must have realized that brutally murdering and sealing innocent mortals inside acolyte statues would fill them with malicious grudge energy. Using the offering runes, this grudge would be offered to the thirty-three idols. How long could gods so tainted with carnage and grievance retain their celestial force? Besides, the thirty-three idols were already deposed gods, and Hua Xin was likely the source of whatever celestial force remained. He consumed a little of that force each time he subdued Yunhai, and the latter's infernal grudge eroded the rest. It was only a matter of time before the idols collapsed.

Hua Xin's recitation—*"Yunhai, my disciple, Yunhai"*—was probably his last desperate attempt to hold him back.

The four remaining idols still stood because Gao E and the other commoners received dreams that enabled them to escape the acolyte statues, sparing the idols the full brunt of their hateful offerings. When Gao E told them a god came to her in a dream, everyone assumed the

god had been up to no good. In hindsight, the god saying they still "had attachments" and the tomb "lacked celestial energy" was probably trying his best to save the formation from imminent collapse. As Wu Xingxue thought it over, he felt certain the god in their dreams was Hua Xin.

Everyone was about to start speaking again, but the circumstances did not give them time for further questions. The remaining four idols alone could not maintain the formation, and the Altar of Deposed Gods abruptly exploded, casting rubble across the floor and leaving a deep hollow in the earth. No one could see who lay inside; all they saw were infernal auras thick as ink, swirling in on themselves as they poured from the chasm like a writhing mass of snakes, each straightening for the strike, jaws stretched wide to reveal sharp fangs—

"Watch out!" Yi Wusheng cried.

It was too late. The initiates' cultivation levels were inadequate, and when the infernal aura surged forth to enwrap them, they walked docilely through Xiao Fuxuan's phantom-sword barrier like corpses compelled by a necromancer. The snakelike mass of swirling infernal aura struck as quick as lightning.

"Ah!"

The initiates were pulled screaming into the infernal aura. They drew their weapons in a panic, dozens of glowing swords piercing the aura only to strike at nothing. Their attacks had no effect at all. Perhaps the one lying below was too hungry. The second the aura caught hold of three of the living, it dragged them toward the hollow.

As they teetered on the brink, Xiao Fuxuan drew the long sword at his side and turned its hilt in his fingers. The blade's golden light drew a series of great patterns in the air. He placed all five fingers on the silver hilt and coolly pushed it down. With an ocean's roar, the sword surged forth like a gale over the mountains, the frost-touched blade growing beyond measure before cutting down with the force of a falling star.

The strike could have parted the sea. As the all-encompassing infernal aura was cleaved in two, it loosened its grip and dropped the initiates to the ground. They scrambled for their swords. A coldly uttered command—"Move!"—echoed before a golden light swept over them and pulled them back into the protective barrier of phantom swords. They whirled around to find the soaring infernal aura gathering in massive waves that nearly filled the entire tomb.

The Tianxiu Immortal held out his sword, his face blank as the boundless darkness swallowed him whole.

Everyone paled and cried out in alarm. The next instant, they heard a metallic hum, and infinite rays of golden light pierced the fathomless dark aura like the blazing sun cutting through a cloud. The Sword of Absolution turned to strike ruthlessly down. Sparks flew when it sliced into the ground, even as a cold wind and wintry fog followed in its wake, sweeping aside the infernal aura as ice collided with fire.

Wu Xingxue saw Xiao Fuxuan half kneel before the deep hollow, his hand on his sword's hilt. He walked through the phantom-sword barrier, ignoring the initiates who tried to stop him, and approached Xiao Fuxuan. Now that the infernal aura was gone, the person lying in the hollow was exposed.

It really was Yunhai. He closely resembled his idol, and it was obvious that whoever had erected it in the tomb was intimate with his appearance. The likeness was carved from stone with an ash-gray undertone, yet Yunhai's coloring was somehow even more dull. With some life to him, some blood in his cheeks, he was probably quite beautiful. Now, with his disheveled hair, vine-entangled body, and ink-black robes as dark as his flowing aura, no one would guess that he'd once lived in Urbs Caelestia.

Among the vines entwining his neck, one grew over the rest. A single flower, long withered, grew from its tip and covered half of his face. Wu Xingxue reached out to move the flower aside. Before he could touch it, Xiao Fuxuan grabbed his hand, ever so slightly disturbing the air. The petals shivered, revealing fluttering glimpses of the hidden half of Yunhai's face.

Wu Xingxue frowned. The unobscured half of Yunhai's face had a celestial beauty and grace, but the veiled half was ghastly and covered in scars. He wondered how Yunhai came to look like this—and he wondered how Hua Xin felt when he came to the valley, sword in hand, and saw his disciple's changed face.

Suddenly, Xiao Fuxuan's sword moved, emerging from the rock before plunging straight back in. The sword intent quaked, and a peal like that of a bell rang through the valley. Though it rang only once, the initiates all dropped into crouches and wrapped their hands protectively over their heads.

"What is that sound?!"

They were so close together, yet they could not hear each other. They were practically yelling. Yi Wusheng knocked at their foreheads to snap them out of it, then turned to look at Xiao Fuxuan's trembling celestial sword.

"That is probably…the reckoning," said Yi Wusheng.

According to legend, when the Tianxiu Immortal imposed his judgment, he summoned the fiend for a reckoning on behalf of heaven to learn how the evil had come to pass.

Under the ceaseless song of sword and dissipating black mist, everyone witnessed what had happened centuries ago.

Chapter 24:
Yunhai

CENTURIES AGO, the Imperial Capital still existed in the mortal realm. It was built at the foot of Mount Taiyin.

The most important place in the Imperial Capital was the Divination Commission, where the Twelve Immortals of the Spirit Terrace were enshrined. The commission was responsible for divining the will of the heavens, so it maintained strong connections to all major cultivation clans.

Two commissioners, left and right, were in charge of the Divination Commission. Yunhai's father was one of them. The post was admired and envied, making it both prestigious and dangerous. In good times, it offered unrivaled glory; in bad times, it caused complete ruin.

Yunhai first saw Mingwu Hua Xin in the guest house at the Divination Commission. Yunhai was still a spoiled little child back then, raised in silks and ermine, and he treated the Divination Commission like a second home, often playing in the courtyards and corridors of its guest house.

One day, as he chased a pine marten through a winding corridor, he almost ran headlong into a guest. As he stumbled, a gust of wind came out of nowhere and stopped his forward motion, and a palm stopped him from smashing his forehead. His caretakers scurried over, crying out "Be careful!" as they ran. They picked him up and backed away, keeping their heads low in front of the guest, looking tense and apprehensive.

Only Yunhai, blessed with the fearlessness of the naive, raised his eyes curiously.

Hua Xin was dressed casually that day. The white deer depicted in his portrait was not with him, nor did he have his Guiding Light. He wore simple white garments, his long hair pulled back with a single uncarved wooden hairpin. Although this was a very common style of dress on the streets of the Imperial Capital, the man's appearance was somehow transfixing. By the time Yunhai gathered himself, Hua Xin had reached the end of the winding corridor and stepped into the guest hall.

His white robes brushed over the tall threshold, then he was gone.

Yunhai turned his face up to his caregivers. “Who’s that?”

They shushed him and carried him far from the guest hall. Only once they were behind the buildings did one of them say in a hushed tone, “That’s our lord’s celestial friend.”

Yunhai knew very little about anything back then, least of all the rules regulating relations between celestials and mortals. He merely had a vague notion that “celestial” meant Hua Xin was omnipotent and “friend” meant he was a trusted companion. Yunhai concluded he must have been someone like that.

Only later did it strike him the man had appeared only once in all of those years.

The next time Yunhai saw Hua Xin was six years later. The Imperial Capital was in chaos, and the Divination Commission had long since appointed new commissioners. Yunhai’s father was brought low by false accusations, and most of his household lost their lives. Their great family estate stood empty.

Yunhai was still quite young, but now that he was the son of a criminal, he could no longer use his own name. Traveling south with other refugees, he eventually found himself in the Brightwater region. Back then, Brightwater had closed its gates to avoid being swept up in the pandemonium. With nowhere else to go, refugees had no choice but to take temporary shelter in abandoned mountain shrines.

It was a particularly cold midwinter, and few refugees survived the month. Corpses lay in piles inside the otherwise empty shrines, and their seething resentment hung heavy in the air, luring in ever more fiends and evil creatures. By the time that winter drew to a close, only a few of the living remained in the mountains. Yunhai was one of them.

One day, he snatched some meat from the hands of a half-crippled ghoul. In the ensuing fight, the ghoul broke his leg and scratched his left eye. Covering the damaged eye with one hand, he ducked into a cave and curled up inside. After he wiped the blood from his face, he lifted the strange meat he’d taken off the ghoul to his mouth. Before tearing into it, he suddenly spotted a lantern shining through the winter night. He was not in the habit of waiting around to see who or what had come prowling, so he crawled to hide—but the light moved too

quickly. Before he managed a single step, the lantern-bearer was in front of him.

Yunhai remembered that face. He'd seen it only once before, back when he was almost too young to form memories. Nevertheless, he recalled every moment of that encounter so well that he recognized the man in a single glance, even after six years. It was none other than his father's celestial friend.

Yunhai looked up at the man again, just as he had as a young child.

But six years ago, Yunhai had been wide-eyed and full of curiosity. Now, he was blind in one eye and smeared with half-dried blood, and his face held nothing but numbness. He dragged his broken leg and knelt behind the granite cave wall, staring woodenly at the man he'd once caught just a fleeting, unforgettable glimpse of.

"I was entrusted to come get you," said the man.

It was a wonderful voice, and as it carried through the winter night's fog, Yunhai could almost feel a warm zephyr passing through the trees.

Mortals were so strange. Yunhai had not shed a tear when his family fell to ruin. He did not cry when he had to beg for food, when he was cold and hungry, nor when a ghoul broke his leg and scratched his eye blind…but the words *"I was entrusted to come get you"* made his eyes water. He dug his fingers into the dead flesh in his hands and stared expressionlessly at Mingwu Hua Xin through unshed tears.

When Hua Xin reached for him, Yunhai sprang up, grabbed the hand that had once stopped him from falling, and bit down brutally.

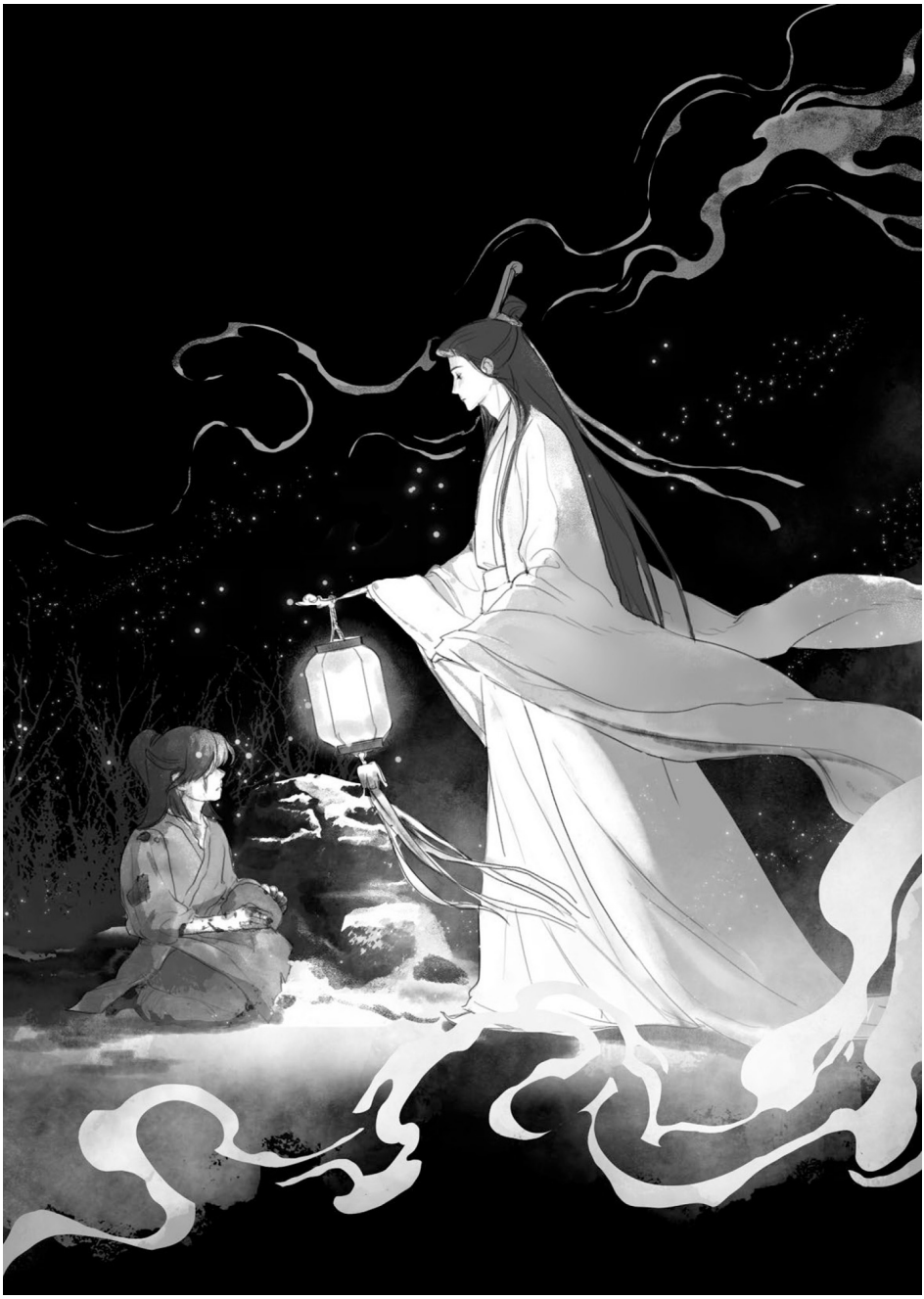
Aren't you my father's celestial friend? Yunhai thought resentfully as the taste of copper filled his mouth. *If you're his friend, where were you when he was framed? Where were you when he lost his life? Where were you while his whole family fell to ruin? Who entrusted you, and what makes you think you have the right to come for me?!*

Though he did not say a word, Hua Xin still seemed able to hear him. His wonderful voice spoke again. "The Spirit Terrace has heavenly laws, and they dictate that I cannot interfere in mortal affairs."

That voice was warm and pleasant, but it lacked deeper emotion. There was no sorrow over an old friend's death, no remorse from doing

nothing to prevent an unfolding tragedy, and not a hint of pity. It was as though his heart was made of stone.

Then, it occurred to Yunhai that celestials were omnipotent. He should not have been able to bite Hua Xin's hand, let alone gnaw it bloody. Hua Xin could have stopped him but did not, which meant he'd let Yunhai tear into him with his anger. Once Yunhai understood that, he released Hua Xin's hand.



Instead of cleaning the bloody wound, Hua Xin bent down to check Yunhai's injured eye and leg. "Let's go. I'll take you back to get your wounds treated."

Yunhai turned his head away and dodged Hua Xin's hand. "I can't walk," he said hoarsely.

Hua Xin ignored his objection. "You still have your tongue?" He sounded surprised.

Yunhai looked at him in confusion.

"I thought you couldn't talk either," Hua Xin said, clapping his hands together. A white deer darted from the woods behind him. He lifted Yunhai onto the deer's back and led it down the mountain.

Perhaps out of fear Yunhai would fall, Hua Xin had immobilized Yunhai once he was astride the deer's back, leaving him no choice but to ride along.

"How old are you?" asked Hua Xin.

Yunhai sneered. *You don't even know how old I am? How dare you call yourself my father's friend.*

Hua Xin's voice remained calm. "Years move slowly in Urbs Caelestia. I don't mark these things."

"Eleven," said Yunhai.

"What's your name?"

Yunhai sneered again.

"From now on, we won't use your mundane name anymore. This generation goes by the name Yun, so let's call you…Yunhai."

Yunhai was silent. He hadn't used his own name in so long that he was on the verge of forgetting it entirely, and yet he still felt sadness when he heard Hua Xin's words. Since he couldn't move or object, he simply closed his eyes and accepted it. From then on, he was Yunhai.

Mortals could not ascend the thirty-three-floor pagoda atop Mount Taiyin, so Yunhai couldn't go to Urbs Caelestia. When Hua Xin said he was taking Yunhai "back" to get his wounds treated, he meant back to the Hua estate. Hua Xin might have claimed he was taking Yunhai in, but in Yunhai's eyes, Hua Xin simply abandoned him with the Hua

Clan.

At this time, the Hua Clan had yet to move to Peach Blossom Isle, and they had fewer disciples. Nevertheless, the clan was thriving. Most of their disciples cultivated swordplay, though a few cultivated alchemical medicine. No matter which path they took, their days were filled with training. Yunhai alone had neither a sword to wield nor an alchemical formula to refine. Once his eye and leg healed, he was bored to distraction, so he spent his days wandering the Hua estate's halls.

He asked the leader of the Hua Clan and each of the elders if there was anything he ought to be studying or when he might get his own sword. They praised him as a rare prodigy, a once-in-a-lifetime talent with the perfect constitution for cultivation, but expressed reluctance to teach him anything because he was the disciple of Hua Xin himself, the Chief of the Spirit Terrace. It was beyond their station to disregard the hierarchy and agree to teach him, so he had to wait for the chief to come do it himself.

"Why doesn't he come teach me, then?!" asked Yunhai.

Neither the clan leader nor the elders had any answers for him other than dry laughs. Eventually, Yunhai stopped making a nuisance of himself and gave up. Sometimes, when other disciples practiced swordplay, he stood nearby to watch. He even took a few peeks at elixir refinement. More often than not, he spent his days wasting time in the library.

Hua Xin's idol and portrait were enshrined in there. Sometimes, Yunhai grabbed a scroll and spent the day in front of the portrait, half daydreaming, half stewing in silent discontent. Young people were proud, and Yunhai could not stand to be ignored. Besides, he truly wanted to learn something and distinguish himself.

Just like that, he passed two years in inexplicable disregard, the sharp corners of his temper worn away until almost none was left, before seeing Hua Xin again.

Hua Xin seemed to have forgotten his special disciple; the purpose of his visit that day had nothing to do with Yunhai. But Yunhai wasn't about to waste this opportunity, so before Hua Xin could leave, Yunhai stopped him and asked in his sweetest voice, "Master, do you regret bringing me here? Every disciple is training, and I'm the only odd one out. If you'd like me to go, please tell me. I can always leave on my own."

A formerly pampered child, there was some degree of haughtiness to him, but his years as a refugee and vagrant had left him caustic and sensitive. Because he was still so young, that haughtiness and sensitivity were written all over his face.

Hua Xin wasn't planning to answer, but after studying Yunhai's expression for a long while, he decided to offer an explanation. "You do possess exceptional constitution, Yunhai. It's rare in the mortal realm. If you choose to cultivate, you will find it easier to reach apotheosis than other people. There's no need to start this year or the next."

"Not this year or the next—when exactly can I start?"

"When you're suited to use a sword."

"Why am I not suited *now*?"

Yunhai would remember for a long time to come the look Hua Xin gave him in that moment. His gaze was calm, but he seemed to see through everything. "Because you've never stopped obsessing over annihilating everyone who framed your father. You're consumed with thoughts of subjecting them to every torment imaginable and repaying their debt with their blood."

Yunhai fell silent.

"Master is brilliant and wise, with an illuminating gaze that reveals all truths," he said after processing this. "But should I *not* be obsessed? Must I cultivate until I have no love, no hate, no animus nor grudge, until I can calmly watch those who destroyed my family die in their sleep, like you do?"

Hua Xin did not answer, and Yunhai continued to stare at him until both his eyes watered just as they had when he was cowering in that cave, holding a lump of dead flesh in his hands.

"No one is asking you to become just like me, but cultivation is a long road. The path you seek is too short," Hua Xin finally said.

"How is it short?"

"Killing takes one flick of a sword. What comes after? What will you do then? You won't have a foundation anymore."

I'll think of something once I lose my foundation, Yunhai thought. He parted his lips but did not make a sound. At last, he bowed. "This disciple understands now. I'll…I'll try," he said with lowered eyes.

On some level, he was indeed a prodigy endowed by heaven. Once he said he would try, not a hint of his obsession was discernible any longer. He was in no hurry to have a sword, showed no further interest in alchemical formulations, and continued to spend all his time at the library, day in and day out. So it was that he was worn down for another two years.

During that time, Hua Xin visited the Hua estate on three occasions. Each time, Yunhai remained in the library, never once running out to ask his master when it would be time to begin. When Hua Xin saw him next, the boy who had once held dead meat in his hands was almost unrecognizable. According to the clan leader and elders, Yunhai had the most winning personality of all Hua Clan disciples. He got along with just about everyone, and his calm, deliberate bearing gave him a celestial air. Yet he was only sixteen, so Hua Xin spent the following year testing him. Finally, in the year he turned seventeen, he gave Yunhai a sword of his own.

Before the world forgot him, they described Yunhai as a once-in-a-century prodigy endowed by heaven itself. Having taken up his sword at seventeen, he focused exclusively on cultivation for eight years before reaching apotheosis, something many couldn't accomplish in a lifetime. He and Hua Xin shared a deep bond as master and disciple, and both were established in Urbs Caelestia. Theirs was an uplifting tale.

Because he was so unusually young, Yunhai's remarkable ascent to Urbs Caelestia became a popular topic of discussion among other celestials. Nevertheless, what Yunhai remembered most clearly about that day was not his journey to the top of the Taiyin Celestial Pagoda nor his first steps into Urbs Caelestia…it was the two people he saw there.

Chapter 25:
Rex Spiritus

THE DAY HE ARRIVED in Urbs Caelestia, he was greeted by a celestial emissary holding a long jade scepter. The emissary greeted him with a smile.

"Squire."

People from Urbs Caelestia spoke with a soft upward lift on their sentences. Somehow, the emissary's tone gave the word a feeling of intimacy.

That sounded rather nice, Yunhai thought.

"What did you call me?" he asked.

"Squire is what we call any celestial who hasn't received a formal title."

"Will everyone call me that?"

The emissary nodded. "Yes, everyone will call you that."

"Including the Chief Immortal?"

The emissary seemed startled, and a quizzical look spread over his face.

Yunhai waved his hand as if to dismiss his words. "It was just an offhand question."

The emissary led him to the base of a seemingly endless set of stairs and pointed into the distance. "Squire, every new arrival to Urbs Caelestia must pray to heaven at the Spirit Terrace, accept the heavenly edicts, and greet the Twelve Immortals. The Twelve are almost every celestial's superior, especially Chief Immortal Mingwu."

Yunhai was more than happy to comply. Hua Xin rarely visited the mortal realm, and Yunhai only saw him a few times a year at most.

"Almost every celestial?" Yunhai asked uncertainly.

"Yes. There are two exceptions." The emissary must have explained this to many people before, and seeing Yunhai's curiosity, he decided to proceed. "Neither of the two exceptions came to Urbs

Caelestia through cultivation and apotheosis. Instead, they were directly invoked by the Spirit Terrace's Heavenly Principles."

He explained what it meant to be invoked, then continued. "Edicts from the Heavenly Principles are sent to them directly without passing through the Spirit Terrace, and no one else knows what they say. Naturally, they do not fall under the Twelve's jurisdiction."

Yunhai was blown away. "They receive edicts directly?"

"Correct."

Based on Yunhai's time at the Divination Commission, he'd always assumed that the Twelve Immortals of the Spirit Terrace were the highest-ranking immortals in Urbs Caelestia, with Hua Xin at the pinnacle. He wasn't sure what to make of learning that there were two beyond even Hua Xin.

"Wouldn't that mean they're superior to the Chief Immortal?" he asked.

As a subject of Spirit Terrace, the emissary was not equipped to answer this question. He paused, then said vaguely, "Those two particular immortals are not involved with trivial affairs. They don't accept offerings, and they don't follow the Spirit Terrace's proclamations. There is mutual respect between them and the Chief Immortal, and they do not interfere with one another."

"What do they look like? What are their conferred titles? Are they easy to recognize? Should I try to avoid them if I encounter them in Urbs Caelestia?" Yunhai thought a bit, then smiled. "I like to joke around, and I'd feel terrible if I offended anyone with my ignorance. Please, emissary, do you mind sharing a bit more?"

"One was conferred the title Tianxiu. At his invocation, he was given the name Mian, god of penance. He's rather easy to identify by the three mourning studs he wears on the shell of his ear."

"Mourning studs? What are mourning studs?"

"I don't know exactly. That's just what everyone calls them. Tianxiu was invoked very early. He was already here when the Twelve came into existence, so of course the other celestials defer to him. He does not possess the kind of temperament that lends itself to closeness, so no one dared ask."

Then I'd better steer clear of him if I can, Yunhai thought. "And the

other one?"

"The other one… He precedes even the Tianxiu Immortal. He was conferred the title Rex Spiritus, and the name Zhao was bestowed on him at his invocation."

Rex Spiritus… Yunhai waited to hear more, but the emissary suddenly halted. He turned, held the scepter in both hands, and gave a deep bow to someone or other. Yunhai tried to see who commanded such respect from an emissary of the Spirit Terrace, then heard the emissary address the visitor.

"Lord Tianxiu, what are you doing at Spirit Terrace?"

Startled, Yunhai watched as the Tianxiu Immortal himself came up the stairs. He looked quite young, with a commanding, if cold, presence. Even among the many immortals gathered in Urbs Caelestia, the Tianxiu Immortal did stand out. Even with several flights of stairs between them, Yunhai could feel malevolence radiating from the three mourning studs on his ear, like cold iron wedged inside warm jade. The contrast of arrogance and indifference was truly distinctive.

However, Tianxiu was merely unapproachable rather than condescending or rude.

"I have business," he said evenly, nodding at the emissary.

"We have a squire reaching apotheosis today," the emissary replied. "The Twelve Immortals may not have time to attend to anything else. Shall I inform them of your visit?"

When the emissary mentioned his apotheosis, Yunhai smiled and bowed at the Tianxiu Immortal. "My lord, you may enter the Spirit Terrace before me if you wish. I don't have anything important to do. I can wait."

Tianxiu's gaze swept toward Yunhai, and he nodded. "No need," he said in the same low, even voice. "You go ahead and pray. I'm not here to see Hua Xin."

The cold fog at the entrance to Urbs Caelestia moved again, and from afar, Yunhai caught the sounds of emissary guards bowing and making highly respectful greetings.

What a lively day this is, thought Yunhai as he moved to continue up the stairs. But the Tianxiu Immortal halted, his gaze crossing the staircase to the entrance as the emissary who had led him here hastened

to bow again. Curious, Yunhai turned around and saw a silhouette emerge from the fog.

The figure wore a plain garment the color of white jade, its fabric trimmed with an intricate silver pattern. With his cuffs tightly fastened and robes cinched narrowly at his waist, he appeared tall and slender, moving with an aristocratic grace. Once through the fog, he did not proceed but instead turned as though waiting for something.

Soon, two celestial pageboys trailed out of the mist. One had a long sword in his arms and was muttering complaints all the while.

"My lord, it's so heavy."

The sword was beautiful, its hilt engraved with fine silver filigree. Judging by how the pageboy struggled to carry it, it also seemed unusually weighty.

"As if it's any heavier than you. Give it here," the tall man replied.

The pageboy sprang into action at once, hurriedly throwing the sword to the man, who caught it easily. He wrapped his slender fingers around the hilt, twirled it deftly several times, and turned to continue briskly up the stairs.

That was when Yunhai saw that the man wore a mask. It had a layer of intricate silver filigree matching the hilt of his sword and exuded an air of otherworldly nobility. Among the crowd of celestials, the mask was as easily recognizable as the mourning studs in Tianxiu's ear.

"Who is that?" Yunhai quietly asked the emissary.

"That would be the other one I mentioned," the emissary replied at a similar volume.

The newly arrived immortal sauntered up the stairs, azure morning sunlight cutting across the cold mist of Urbs Caelestia to outline his slender silhouette. It occurred to Yunhai that Zhao, the name heaven had bestowed on him, meant luminous.

"Why is Rex Spiritus wearing a mask? Is there some taboo about seeing his face?" asked Yunhai.

"Well, it's not exactly a taboo," the emissary said under his breath. "It's just that every time he receives a heavenly edict, he dons a mask to conduct his business."

“What sort of business?”

“That, only the Heavenly Principles know.” The emissary stopped talking.

Yunhai assumed that Rex Spiritus was as cold and unapproachable as Tianxiu but quickly realized his mistake. Rex Spiritus climbed several steps before stopping in his tracks. Even with a mask over his face, it seemed as though he could see perfectly well. He inclined his head slightly toward Tianxiu, and though he did not speak, the two celestial pageboys at his side did. They bowed to Tianxiu and yelled across the lengthy stairway.

“My lord! *Our* lord says we ought to apologize for the prank last time. It was just a misunderstanding.”

Tianxiu listened to them blabber, then replied without expression. “Forget it.”

“My lord, he says to forget it!” the pageboys reported, turning up their faces. Rex Spiritus let out a soft “Oh” and pinched the bottom edge of his mask to lift it away a little, exposing a fair chin and a section of his straight nose. He smiled, then let the mask fall back into place. Holding the sword in one hand, he poked his pageboys with the sword’s hilt and walked in their direction.

Perhaps because he’d met them on his very first day in Urbs Caelestia, even before the other celestials, the fantastical rumors of the Tianxiu Immortal and Rex Spiritus did not affect Yunhai too deeply. In the century that followed, he became one of the few people who had a rapport with both.

His bond with the Tianxiu Immortal was shallower, mostly because that was just how Tianxiu was. As a god of penance, he lacked the time or space for close personal relationships. Conversely, Yunhai’s bond with Rex Spiritus was deeper, because his personality made it easy.

Even though Rex Spiritus seemed quite happy in a crowd, he lived rather out of the way. Yunhai wondered why. Urbs Caelestia had ten thousand jade pavilions, yet Rex Spiritus chose to live on the end farthest away from everyone else. Beyond being desolate and devoid of people, it was also directly next to the Altar of Deposed Gods, a place everyone considered taboo.

“Do you actually like this spot?” Yunhai once asked Rex Spiritus.

“It suits me,” he replied.

Yunhai mentioned it to Hua Xin, but he only said, “I don’t know why he lives there, but he must have his reasons.”

Spirit Terrace and the two invoked immortals had little to do with one another, and Hua Xin was the kind of person who lacked any curiosity about others. When they were together, he and Yunhai seldom talked about such things. More often than not, Yunhai was instead trying his utmost to bring a smile to his master’s face…or even a frown.

That was acceptable, too.

Perhaps Hua Xin's stoic manner when he came to retrieve Yunhai had seared a permanent brand on the young celestial's heart, but for whatever reason, eliciting emotion from his master became Yunhai's obsession. He wanted Hua Xin's face to betray real emotion—not the warm smile in his idols or portraits but true delight or rage. Any emotion was fine. Sometimes, he felt elation from making his master laugh, yet at the same time, he scorned himself for it. Yunhai found himself quite strange. In the mortal realm, he'd disregarded everything but cultivation for the sole purpose of entering Urbs Caelestia. Now that he was in Urbs Caelestia, he did everything he could think of just to bring the Chief Immortal—the most celestial of them all—a bit more down to earth.

He failed often, but he succeeded at times. Even the Spirit Terrace emissaries noted that the chief seemed to have changed.

Once, when Yunhai watched a smile spread across Hua Xin's face, he thought, *Living like this for a few thousand years wouldn't be so bad. Perhaps I should take the injured and blind orphan I once was and leave him for dead in that barren cave.*

Alas, it was not to be. Yunhai oversaw mortal rites of passage, and of all the gods, he interacted with the mortal realm the most. Sooner or later, he was bound to be faced with those he had once sworn to kill. He avoided three such encounters but could not escape the fourth. The bastards could live to be a hundred or more, a concept he found most unfathomable—so he killed them all.

There were thirty-one of them, far fewer than his family lost.

After the slaughter, he accepted a heavenly edict and set off to the Spirit Terrace to accept heaven's punishment. It was the first time he ever saw Hua Xin truly angry.

Chapter 26:
Fallen God

THE SPIRIT TERRACE was neither a jade pavilion nor a raised platform but comprised twelve suspended spires connected by covered jade corridors. Each of the Twelve Immortals was in charge of one, and Hua Xin's towered above the rest. Every spire had a place set aside for genuflection and punishment, and the ordeal one must endure to earn penance differed in each: twelve spires, twelve punishment platforms, each holding its own tribulation, from mountains of sabers to seas of flames.

Yunhai discarded his talismans before traveling from one spire to the next to continue his penance. He could barely stand by the time he reached Hua Xin, but he stood stock-still. His gossamer garment that once fluttered with transcendence now dripped with blood, and he'd singed his loose cuffs and hems kneeling among the preceding terrace's flames.

He would never forget the way Hua Xin looked at him in that moment. Deep beneath that dark cloud of anger, Yunhai was certain he could see a trace of tenderness, and though his every pore dripped blood, he burst into laughter. This only intensified Hua Xin's anger.

"Yunhai! You—"

Yunhai had never seen his master enraged to the point where words failed him. Until now, Hua Xin had always been good at reasoning with Yunhai, his admonishments delivered calmly, his demeanor collected and empathetic. Hua Xin took care not to go overboard and left it up to Yunhai whether he wanted to comprehend. There were a million trivial matters in the mortal world, and Urbs Caelestia certainly had its own; serious problems existed everywhere, yet none had ever made Hua Xin this angry.

I am such a bastard, Yunhai thought, even as he felt a strange joy at eliciting this unprecedented reaction from Hua Xin.

"The day you entered Urbs Caelestia, you made a vow before this Spirit Terrace!" Hua Xin seethed. "The heavenly edict you received that day told you exactly which actions were permitted and which were

forbidden. Did you think it was a joke?!"

"I did not, Master. I remembered every word. I knew what the consequences would be. But at least I had my revenge."

Hua Xin had much more to say, but Yunhai's words left him speechless.

"*I got my revenge*," Yunhai continued. "You knew I couldn't let those lying scumbags go on living without illness or pain. It was unfair."

With that, he approached the punishment platform.

Hua Xin watched Yunhai step onto the suspended stone platform. After a long while, he turned his back on Yunhai and walked away.

"The things that aren't fair in the world could fill oceans. If you meddle in one, you must meddle in another. And someday…"

Yunhai knelt on the stone platform and waited for Hua Xin to continue, but he did not utter another word. Yunhai knew the reason: Hua Xin feared his words might be prophetic, pointing his disciple directly toward "someday." Yunhai brightened at the realization.

Hua Xin waved a sleeve behind his back, and the punishment platform's stone door closed. As Hua Xin's figure retreated from view, the smile vanished from Yunhai's face. Head hung low, he gradually fell into stillness again. The Spirit Terrace punishments were extremely draining, and twelve rounds at twelve different spires would render even the most hearty and obstinate of celestials unconscious and severely weakened.

Yunhai came to in Hua Xin's residence. The wounds he'd sustained were already dressed with celestial poultices and mostly healed. His damaged celestial core had also been mended, and though it would never be fully restored, it would not affect him overmuch. It was obviously the work of Hua Xin. Yunhai rose to look for him, but the only people in the vast estate were several celestial pageboys.

"The chief said you may go, squire," they told him.

Yunhai, who liked to jest and sweet-talk, had so thoroughly charmed Hua Xin's pageboys that they still called him "squire" even though his formal title had been conferred long ago. Hua Xin was the only one who called him Yunhai or, at his most intimate, "my disciple."

"And if I don't leave?" Yunhai asked the pageboy. "Did the chief tell you to drive me away?"

The pageboy shook his head. “He did not. He will not be here for the next few days, so if you aren’t well, squire, please feel free to stay a few more days.”

Hua Xin’s pageboys took after him and were also a bit stoic and painfully earnest. An affectionate pet name lost some of its charm when coming from their mouths, and by the time the words reached Yunhai’s ears, they sounded drily courteous—like “squire” was as stiff as “this Lord Immortal.”

Yunhai sat at the edge of the bed for a moment before he shook his head.

“I’m not going to stay,” he said with a smile. “I’m going home. Tell your chief…” He fell silent for a beat. “Tell him I’m much obliged for the medicine and repair of my celestial core. I appreciate it.”

Before the pageboy could reply, Yunhai was gone.

From that moment onward, Yunhai gradually veered off the righteous path. He never intended to do so, but it was just as Hua Xin said: Everything unfair in the world could fill oceans. He’d intended to meddle in mortal affairs just the once and leave the rest alone, but it was impossible. Soon enough, the result of his first meddling compelled him to interfere again.

It was really quite simple. As a god of rites of passage, he witnessed all manner of partings and reunions. A person might joyfully marry one day and find themself in the underworld the next. Yunhai often lamented these circumstances but never interfered. This was as it should be. Even Urbs Caelestia was not immune to partings. Every once a while, a deposed god would fall back down to the mortal world.

One day, he saw a girl kneeling before his idol. She had just turned thirteen and was in the spring of her youth, as pretty as a cardamom flower branch bursting with green shoots—and she was already dead. The kneeling girl was a revenant who refused to let go, dressed in a wedding gown embroidered with runes. Presumably, someone had arranged for her marriage to a ghost. Her skin was bluish pale, and her eyes were empty sockets dripping bloody tears. Her lips had been sealed, so she could not speak—a folk method for preventing the dead from airing their grievances—but she didn’t need to. The murderous aura that swirled so heavily around her made it clear exactly

what she was praying for.

Revenants like this often came from ruined families, when destitute children with no one left to protect them were forcefully taken as ghost brides. The only thing she could possibly want was the violent deaths of the ones who grabbed her. Praying revenants always wished suffering equal to or worse than their own on the offending party. The girl's eyes had been dug out of their sockets, and she wanted those who took them to suffer the same. Her tragic death demanded vengeance.

Unfortunately, it was impossible—that wasn't how karmic retribution worked. According to the divine rules that bound him, Yunhai could interfere but not get involved; he could do only the minimum. That was what he'd intended from the start, even if the minimum was often nigh undetectable.

He traced the girl's life back through several years and discovered that she'd been left in a shattered home with no one to protect her because someone seeking vengeance on her parents had murdered them when she was very young.

That someone had been Yunhai. The girl's parents were among those who framed Yunhai's family. Therefore, he *had* to interfere, and he couldn't do just the minimum. If he did, the girl would just see him as another injustice in an ocean of wrongs.

That was merely the beginning.

Later, after endless meddling and countless interventions, Yunhai began to lock himself in his residence immediately upon returning from the mortal realm. He finally understood the meaning of Hua Xin's unfinished sentence. There were enough wrongs in the world to fill oceans, and if he meddled in one thing, he'd inevitably have to meddle in another. Over time, more and more people would be involved: This one's enemy might be that one's benefactor, and the person this one wished to kill was the person that one wished to protect. The ties between problems were tangled and complicated, and if he meddled too much, someday his own existence would become the greatest injustice.

Once he killed those thirty-one people, that day was certain to come.

Each time Yunhai violated a heavenly law, Hua Xin had no choice but to accept the heavenly edicts and demote him again and again.

Once the god of rites who received plentiful offerings, Yunhai at last became the numen of the habitually ignored Valley of Laments. What's more, mortal offerings seemed to impact Urbs Caelestia as well; as his offerings and incense dwindled in the mortal realm, his home in Urbs Caelestia saw a steady decline in visitors.

Yunhai was sensitive, and at first he assumed the celestials were as elitist as mortals. That may have been part of it, but he gradually realized that the Heavenly Principles themselves dictated his increasing oblivion. When the other celestials could see him, they still recalled who he was—but when he was out of their sight, he was equally out of their minds. The only celestial who seemed unaffected was Rex Spiritus.

As a new resident in Urbs Caelestia, he'd asked Hua Xin, "I know Tianxiu is the god of penance, but what does Rex Spiritus oversee? Seems like nobody talks about it."

Hua Xin gave this some thought and replied, "He does what all the other celestials cannot. Even I don't know the details."

This answer puzzled Yunhai. There were as many celestials as there were clouds in the sky, encompassing all that existed. What could the gods *not* do? He always assumed Hua Xin's empty words were merely intended to elevate Rex Spiritus, but it eventually became clear to Yunhai that what Hua Xin said was neither empty nor intended to elevate.

There was a period during which Yunhai always felt uneasy, and it was then that he most often visited Rex Spiritus, who remembered him well. But Rex Spiritus's residence was attached to the Altar of Deposed Gods, anathema to all celestials, so the one Yunhai visited more remained the Spirit Terrace and Hua Xin.

What he feared most was that one day, even Hua Xin would forget that he once had a disciple named Yunhai.

According to legend, there was a mysterious heavenly bell in Urbs Caelestia. None of the celestials could see it, but every once in a while, they could almost hear it ringing. The bell only rang when a god fell back to the mortal realm. Yunhai had heard it several times, but he never knew where the bell was hung…until the day he saw it with his own eyes.

It was a rare long night in Urbs Caelestia, shrouded in fog. Yunhai was by the window when he suddenly felt the urge to see Hua Xin. The

desire came without warning, and he froze for a moment before deciding to close the window and leave his jade pavilion. As his hand touched the window frame, he heard a small rustle, like the sound of fabric brushing against metal.

Do I have a guest?

Yunhai spun around and came face-to-face with Rex Spiritus. He wore his hair high with a white jade crown, and the silver-filigreed mask covered his face. Cold mist swirled around his tall figure like a cloak. He looked just as he did at the entrance to Urbs Caelestia all those years ago—but back then, light gilded his silhouette. Now, he was draped only in the darkness of night.

Yunhai stared at him, his heart racing from fright, but he spoke casually. “Why mask up to visit a friend?”

Rex Spiritus sighed near imperceptibly. “Does it look like I’m here to visit a friend?”

Yunhai supposed not. Rex Spiritus was not attired for a lark, nor had he brought the pageboys who were always at his side. He didn’t even have the sword he was so fond of. Yunhai stood in place, and a tense air settled between the old friends. Rex Spiritus did not move or speak. There was an uncharacteristic lack of levity in his presence.

Yunhai spoke first. “My lord, you’ve…accepted a heavenly edict.”

“Yes,” said Rex Spiritus. “Since you’ve already guessed that, you must know why I’m here.”

Yunhai’s smile was bitter. “It’s my turn to fall back to the mortal world?”

Rex Spiritus did not reply, his silence itself an acknowledgment.

“And here I thought all it took was a leap from the Altar of Deposed Gods.”

Yunhai always thought falling back to the mortal realm meant stepping onto the Altar of Deposed Gods and jumping. That would be that. Now that Rex Spiritus was here with a heavenly edict, he realized it wasn’t so simple. His celestial core had to be destroyed to sever his ties to Urbs Caelestia.

It was over in the blink of an eye but felt everlasting because of the ineffable pain it caused. As agony enwrapped him, he saw something hanging from Rex Spiritus’s fingers: a bell of white jade.

Although he couldn't see every detail, he heard it chime and at once understood where the heavenly bell resided. It didn't hang under any awning; it was carried on Rex Spiritus's person.

"The heavenly bell…" Yunhai said hoarsely.

Rex Spiritus shook his head, his voice vague and distant. "The rumors are wrong. It's not called a heavenly bell. It's a Dreambell."

Dreambell… Yunhai curled into himself, repeating the word subconsciously. He heard Rex Spiritus speaking to him.

"The mortal realm's not a bad place to be. The Mount Blossomfell Bazaar is really vibrant and so much more fun than Urbs Caelestia. Nine shakes of this Dreambell will weave you a grand dream. You'll step off the Altar of Deposed Gods, and when you open your eyes, you'll forget what happened these past one hundred years. You won't feel so bad anymore."

"When you open your eyes, you'll forget what happened these past one hundred years." Was that why a bell always rang just before the other gods were struck back to earth? *I won't remember anything. I won't remember anyone.*

Without a celestial core, a mortal body could not hold on for long in Urbs Caelestia. Yunhai was already disoriented, but still he fought. As the white jade bell rang, he gathered his remaining celestial energy and threw in half of his soul to block the bell's effects. He had been obstinate his whole life, and he'd rather die on this hill than change his mind. He refused to forget.

The first few years after Yunhai fell back to the mortal world, all was peaceful. Though he'd risked everything to block it, the Dreambell still had an effect. He forgot everything that had happened in the past hundred years beyond a vague impression of an old dream. In the dream, he'd broken his leg and blinded an eye, but a god had picked him up from where he lay, bloodied and starving, and placed him on the back of a deer.

He tried to describe the dream to many people, but he always forgot what he wanted to say halfway and abandoned the story. He could never quite describe the setting, but he was certain it was a midwinter night. Cold shivers had racked his body, and the only source of warmth had been the god's hand.

The disjointed dream inspired him to try learning thaumaturgy as a way to get a bit closer to the god in his dream. He inquired at many nearby cultivation clans, but none took him in officially. Each one said he had innate flaws that prevented him from gathering the vital force necessary for a cultivator's core. He just wasn't cultivator material.

Then, without warning, the world fell into chaos. What little thaumaturgy he knew amounted to petty tricks that could not protect him, so he had no choice but to flee and hide, living like a vagrant. One night, he crossed paths with a fiend out scavenging for food. Unable to fight it off, his body became its vessel. Like losing an eye or breaking a leg, the feeling of his soul being consumed hurt and dragged an agonized scream out of him. While he huddled on the ground, he had a strange feeling of déjà vu. He seemed to recall having curled up just like this, using every last ounce of strength inside him to resist something… something like…the chiming of a bell.

There was nothing more painful or more ironic than recalling, on the brink of death, the one hundred years lost to oblivion—the god and his white deer that weren't just an empty dream. There really had been such a god, and that god had rescued him from a cold mountain cave. Yunhai remembered becoming the god's disciple and being praised for his exceptional talent. He remembered being the youngest person ever to reach apotheosis and becoming the god of rites of passage, a commission richly rewarded in offerings. He remembered that, on his final day in Urbs Caelestia, he had longed to see his master once more.

But he hadn't seen him again, so how could he possibly die?

Later on, Yunhai reflected that he really was quite talented after all. Only someone truly gifted could turn the tables and absorb the fiend consuming him simply because he refused to die. Every cultivation clan had told him he lacked the ability to gather his vital force and coalesce his cultivator's core, but that wasn't quite true. While he couldn't form a celestial core, he did fine with a fiend's.

As he desperately consumed the infernal energy, a scene from a hundred years prior flashed through his mind—his younger self, injured and hiding in a cave, and Hua Xin coming toward him, lantern shining in the gloom.

He knew no celestial would ever come to save him again. He'd barely survived, and until the end of his days, he wouldn't dare to see

Hua Xin again.

Chapter 27:
The End of the Reckoning

YUNHAI LIVED THE LIFE of a fiend in a daze, as if he were stumbling through a city shrouded in fog the daylight could not penetrate. It was not terribly difficult—ordinary people lived in fear and had to fight for their survival, while cultivation clans had to protect everyone, annihilating fiends and upholding justice. Fiends had the upper hand because they only had to take care of themselves.

Most fiends new to the infernal path would have been afraid of being killed when encountering cultivation clan disciples, but not Yunhai. He progressed at an astonishing pace, and even the leaders of clans had reason to fear him. He could have lived life to the fullest, unchallenged and unrestrained by rules, but he did not. Instead, he hid from cultivation clans to prevent the slightest hint of him from reaching Urbs Caelestia and a certain Spirit Terrace Chief Immortal.

He could no longer shift to other places by projecting an avatar, so he traveled to the southwestern hinterlands to learn forbidden hexes and bush sorcery. With more patience than he'd shown his entire life, he crafted a puppet even gods would struggle to tell from the real thing. He shaped the puppet's face in his own image and left it in the city of Spring Pennant, where the Hua Clan resided.

Spring Pennant had a population of several hundred thousand, and the puppet dissolved into its crowded streets like a drop of rain merging with the ocean. Its chances of encountering a member of the Hua Clan were infinitesimal. Still, he compelled the puppet to live an ordinary life so it would appear that the Yunhai who fell from heaven to the mortal realm was living just as a commoner would.

Once everything was in place, Yunhai left for Gui Province, far from Spring Pennant. Fiends congregated there, and one more would hardly make much of a difference. Rumor had it that one could cultivate an Athymia Hex there—a hex that banished all feelings, including basic emotions. Since fiends were hedonists who enjoyed stimulation and pleasure, few if any cultivated the forbidden hex. Beyond the damage it might cause, sealing away all feelings would make one no different than the boring cultivation clan members who

entered the path by relinquishing attachment.

But Yunhai did cultivate the Athymia Hex. Once he sealed away his full range of emotions, everything that caused him pain ceased to torment him day and night. He had no sorrows, no joys, no fears, and nothing to lose. He saw no difference between a blade of grass, a tree, an ant, a cultivator, or a fiend and was unconcerned whether they lived or died. What he was unable to accomplish in Urbs Caelestia, he finally mastered as a fiend. In hindsight, this too seemed unfair.

The Athymia Hex suited him beautifully. He lived as a true fiend for several years, doing exactly as he pleased and never dwelling on who or what he killed. Once, when passing through the city by Mount Immovable, he even heard the name Mingwu Hua Xin and felt nothing. He looked up momentarily but had no desire to linger.

The only downside of the hex was its backfire effect. Every few months, he spent a day or two in frail and freezing agony, his sorcery and vital force unusable. These periods were an exquisite torture. Lost and confused from pain, he felt like his soul was torn into two, crying one moment and laughing the next, deranged then tranquil. Each time he came to, he found himself covered in lacerations, half his face macabre and haunted from the claw marks he'd inflicted while lost in the pain. In the aftermath, he was once more without joy or sorrow and thought his disfigurement wasn't such a bad thing. Half his face was human, and half was the face of a ghost. It suited him well. In fact, nothing could have been more fitting.

Yunhai didn't know whether it was his ghastly face or his disturbing behavior, but throughout those years, even other fiends stayed out of his way.

He believed he could continue living like this. He intended to survive as long as the gods in Urbs Caelestia. But perhaps the Heavenly Principles could not tolerate his existence—or, given his terrible deeds, maybe there *was* such a thing as karmic retribution.

As for how it all changed, he could no longer say. He remembered hearing a piece of news one day: A group of fiends he'd driven from Gui Province had taken refuge in the Valley of Laments. When he heard the words "Valley of Laments," he sneered and didn't even think back on his boring past as numen of the valley.

Soon enough, he heard that one of Spring Pennant's merchant caravans was lost in the Valley of Laments, and the fiends were

enjoying the spoils. Among the dead were some ordinary commoners who'd wanted to travel through the valley under the caravan's protection. One of them looked the spitting image of Yunhai, so much so that the fiends in their fear almost didn't attack until they were certain the commoner merely resembled him.

Yunhai realized right away that the commoner must have been the puppet he'd planted in Spring Pennant. His reason for making the puppet was to fool someone in Urbs Caelestia into believing he was living a quiet life as a commoner. After cultivating the Athymia Hex, he no longer concerned himself with such trivialities. When he heard of the puppet's demise, he felt a moment's surprise but didn't take it to heart. A puppet had died, and that was all. Aside from rendering the three days and nights he'd spent shaping it pointless, it caused him no harm. If he didn't care, there was no reason anyone else should either. With that, he put all of it, puppet included, out of his mind to never be thought of again.

But then he heard that news of the commoners' deaths had been reported to the cultivators guarding Spring Pennant: the Hua Clan. Supposedly, they'd sent people to the Valley of Laments posthaste. It was hard to describe what Yunhai felt in that moment. The Athymia Hex was still in place, and it would be days before the next backfire period, so he should have been indifferent. He went about his business as he typically did for one day, then two days… He didn't make it to the third, for by the end of the second night, he was atop the high precipice at the Valley of Laments.

He'd once been the numen that protected this place, but it'd been so peaceful then that nobody had bothered to pray for protection. After he fell back to the mortal world, the valley was overrun with fiends and no longer so peaceful. Yunhai traveled to many places over the years but never returned to the Valley of Laments. Now that he was here again, he found the shrine still there but his idol gone. To his surprise, on the altar that had been ignored for years, he found several joss sticks still burning.

He stood outside the empty shrine and stared at the steel-blue sky for a while, then followed the scent of fiends into the narrow gorge. In that moment, his soul seemed to split into two. One half asked, *What are you doing here? What does it have to do with you?* The other half replied, *I must take care of these fools and make another puppet.*

He wanted to clear out the fiends ravaging the valley, then leave another puppet somewhere near the caravan before the Hua Clan arrived. He had even planned out how many injuries he should give it, how wounded it should be to not seem strange, and whether he should make a few other commoners as well. The only thing he hadn't decided was *why* he had to do any of it. Why make the puppet Yunhai appear to have narrowly escaped the disaster and barely survived, and why have the Hua Clan bring it back to Spring Pennant to continue living out its life as an ordinary commoner, safe and sound?

And then what? wondered Yunhai. *Who is it putting on this act for? Who would care? Oh sure, no sorrow or joy here—cut off from emotion and love, indeed,* Yunhai thought mockingly as he wrapped his black robes around himself.

With soaring infernal energy, he purged the valley of fiends. These fiends were afraid of him to begin with, and they were no match for him when he was in a bad mood. Even he could not control his rage. At the end of his killing spree, his fingers trembled with excitement. But while he'd slaughtered the fiends, he had not spared the caravan's corpses. His earth-shattering infernal aura had ripped them to pieces, and the husks flew high in the air before drifting back to earth again like torn silk.

Only when rocks crashed down from the mountains did Yunhai regain some awareness of his surroundings through the veil of his infernal aura. He was about to restrain himself when he heard the metallic whistle of a sword approaching like a gale from beyond the heavens. The blade pierced the swelling infernal aura blackening the valley and beelined right for him. Instantly, his pupils contracted and he stiffened as though sinking into the ice-sealed Boundless Sea. He didn't have to see the sword to know who it belonged to. He could tell by the sound alone that it was Hua Xin's sword aura.

Yunhai had imagined their reunion many times. He knew that day would never come, but he could not stop himself from thinking about it. He imagined he would try to avoid Hua Xin, disappearing without a trace long before Hua Xin could notice him. He also imagined he would feel nothing when they drew their weapons against one another, just like he'd felt nothing when he heard someone near Mount Immovable say the name Hua Xin.

He'd never imagined that he would conceal the half of his face

that belonged to Yunhai, revealing only his monstrous side as he pulled Hua Xin from the heavens and into his ink-black infernal aura.

Evading the sword's bright gleam, he parried and sneered with a voice so hoarse it was unrecognizable. "The Valley of Laments is of no import. It's a place where a merchant caravan and a few commoners met their ends, that's all. How is it worthy of an armed immortal's attention?"

Through the infernal aura swirling around them, neither could see the other, but Yunhai could feel the unmistakable killing intent behind Hua Xin's sword aura, which only grew stronger as the fight went on. Yunhai didn't know why, but that feeling made his heart beat like a war drum. Maybe his years of going around in circles had just been filling the time until this day came.

Yunhai taunted Hua Xin over and over to quicken his attacks, feeling Hua Xin's killing intent grow. Beneath his sword intent, the stones shook and the mountains themselves trembled. He saw Hua Xin unleash a vital move, the tip of his sword aiming for Yunhai's solar plexus with the might of a thousand troops and ten thousand horses.

Yunhai relinquished all resistance. As the sword pierced his heart, celestial energy exploded along the tip of the blade, clashing violently with the infernal energy coursing through his body. The blow struck him so hard it drove him into the ground and pinned him there. Hua Xin followed his sword, gathering energy in his palm to inflict another grave injury. As his palm struck, the earth split. The thick black infernal aura was pushed aside, revealing the unmarked half of Yunhai's face.

Everything went still. The Chief Immortal of the Spirit Terrace's vital move could not be blocked, and Yunhai had not tried. The only possible outcome was the dissolution of his soul and certain death.

Yunhai had never before seen Hua Xin make the expression he made now. In an instant, his jet-black eyes widened, then trembled. Yunhai saw his own face reflected in Hua Xin's eyes: half human, half ghost. A winding river of blood flowed beneath him. He felt his soul crumbling to fragments and dissipating. He felt his infernal aura, freed from the shackle of his husk, flow into the valley like clouds. And he felt the Chief Immortal's perpetually warm hand, which was now cold as ice.

"Yunhai? Yunhai…"

Hua Xin's voice was hoarse, and so soft. He wondered what expression Hua Xin wore while he called his disciple's name like this. Was it pity, or was it heartbreak? He was quite curious, but he could no longer see. His senses flew from him like startled birds. His consciousness was fading. He was about to die.

He felt a satisfaction he could not articulate.

See? At least you won't forget me. In his last second, he smiled. *I'm still such a bastard.*

Immeasurable darkness mingled with fading infernal aura. It wasn't until Xiao Fuxuan's sword stopped ringing that everyone registered the reckoning was over. A person's memory was a collection of fragmented images to begin with, and during the reckoning they crisscrossed and wove together. Unlike the Tianxiu Immortal, the god of penance, an ordinary person could only catch cursory glances, unable to perceive the whole. They could only hold on to fleeting images and indelible impressions: the long white-jade staircase Yunhai saw on his entry to Urbs Caelestia; the unfathomable torments he endured on the Spirit Terrace's punishment platforms; Rex Spiritus, the masked immortal never named in *The Book of Gods*.

When the reckoning drew Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu back to the vault, this last scene was the very first they saw. The scene left a deep impression on them because something about the way Rex Spiritus caught his sword gave them déjà vu. They were so certain they'd seen it somewhere before that they were still mulling over it when the reckoning concluded. It was a long time before they came back to themselves.

Then, they heard it—an infinitesimally quiet intake of breath from within the deep hollow. Jolted back to the present and compelled by curiosity, they huddled at Wu Xingxue's side and leaned forward to peer inside the hollow. Under an entangled web of vines, wrapped in black robes and subdued for several hundred years, Yunhai opened his eyes. His pitch-black pupils focused on the first person he saw, the one looking down from the side of the hollow: Wu Xingxue.

He stared at Wu Xingxue, then parted his parched, cracked lips and called out a name. His voice was so rough it barely made a sound, but following the motion of his lips, it was clear that he said "Rex Spiritus."

Rex Spiritus—the unknown immortal given the name Zhao by heaven.

Fang Chu and Ning Huaishan were too stunned to speak.

Chapter 28:
Self-Punishment

NING HUAISHAN PINCHED Fang Chu at the waist and etheric-whispered, *‹Did you see that?! He said Rex Spiritus…!›*

Fang Chu squared his jaw and swallowed a groan of pain, then pinched Ning Huaishan's finger in turn. *‹Of course I saw it, I'm not blind! You wanna pinch me again?›*

‹I might be better off blind,› Ning Huaishan replied. The more he dwelled on it, the weirder it felt. *‹But that's our archon, you know? He founded Nightgleam and drew its borders! He's an infamous archfiend. Why would anyone call out an immortal's name while looking at him? Why? Is he crazy?›*

‹Maybe they just look alike and he made a mistake, or maybe…› Fang Chu struggled to come up with an explanation but gave up halfway through. *‹Forget it. Make up a reason. Let's leave it at that.›*

One could search the whole world and still never find anyone who resembled their archon. All who had encountered him described him as unique, unforgettable. How could anyone mistake him for someone else? Besides, both Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu remembered the way Rex Spiritus had caught the thrown sword.

Anyone who spent enough time at Wu Xingxue's side knew that he hated carrying anything. If he needed something, he made do with whatever was on hand or borrowed from someone nearby. Having been with Wu Xingxue so long, Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu would just hand him whatever he wanted the instant he stretched out his hand. And every time Wu Xingxue caught something, he rolled it over his fingers.

Among the jade pavilions of Urbs Caelestia, his sword spin had seemed graceful and light, whereas the exact same motion performed in a fiends' lair became somehow inscrutable and portentous.

Ning Huaishan hesitated until he shook the strange idea from his head. Just like Fang Chu, he stared at their archon in bewilderment, trying to make sense of the situation.

Wu Xingxue was no less confused than his fiendlings. He took in

what Yunhai had said and stared down at him.

"What did you call me?"

But Yunhai did not answer. He'd slumbered beneath the earth for so long, so far from daylight, that his face had a deathly pallor like fine ashes from burnt paper offerings, as if he might scatter with the slightest breeze. Slowly, softly, he blinked his eyes, studying Wu Xingxue's every reaction before his eyes fell on Xiao Fuxuan. Yunhai looked him up and down, noticing the black mark on his wrist. Yunhai closed his eyes and quivered under his cover of entangled vines. It took a moment for Wu Xingxue to recognize it as laughter. Because Yunhai was so frail, his laughter was soundless yet still uncontrollable.

"*You* are asking *me* what I called you?" Yunhai's lips moved just slightly, making only the airiest whisper. It was as if the vines constricted his chest and throat so much that he couldn't take a complete breath. But Yunhai was used to and unconcerned with confinement. He kept his eyes closed and went on in his barely audible murmur. "I never could have imagined that the day would come when you would ask me that… Isn't that the kind of question a deposed god who fell from Urbs Caelestia and forgot everything would ask? To think I'd hear it from you…"

Yunhai paused again to laugh without a sound. "Rex Spiritus… Tianxiu…invoked by heaven, taking no offerings, needing no incense…" With his eyes shut, he looked serene, as if he was dreaming of entering Urbs Caelestia for the first time.

"I once…envied you two so much."

Hearing these words, Wu Xingxue raised his eyes to Xiao Fuxuan. In that instant, words flashed through his mind: *"I envy you so much…"*

The voice wasn't nearly so hoarse or so soft. It sounded more like a casual grumble between good friends. Wu Xingxue did not recall the context, but he knew in his gut that Yunhai was the one who'd been speaking—the Yunhai who'd once lived in Urbs Caelestia.

Urbs Caelestia had just demoted Yunhai to numen of the Valley of Laments. He was still undergoing additional punishment from Chief Immortal Hua Xin, and though he passed by the Spirit Terrace six times, he was too ashamed to go in. Walking circles around Urbs Caelestia eventually brought him to the secluded Seat of Spring Breeze. Rex

Spiritus was often at home, and today he sat by the windowsill with one leg propped up, a bottle of ambrosial wine and two empty cups on the table in front of him.

Before he'd endured near a century, Yunhai often spoke teasingly with others to hide the shadows in his heart. "You complain that nobody ever comes by, but you sure are prepared for callers," he said lightly. "Rex Spiritus, do you have a prior engagement with a certain beauty? Have I come at a bad time?"

"It *is* a bad time," Rex Spiritus replied crossly. "And you can avoid it if you run along now."

"No can do. I had a setback today and I have to talk to someone about it, otherwise…" Yunhai paused.

"Otherwise what?"

Yunhai laughed at himself. "Otherwise I'll have to keep walking around aimlessly until I pass the Spirit Terrace a seventh time."

Rex Spiritus was not involved with the Spirit Terrace; those were the rules. He did not reply right away.

"What is this setback you speak of?" he asked instead. "The suspense is killing me."

"Can I have some of that wine?" Yunhai asked.

"You cannot." Rex Spiritus swept a hand over the table, and the bottle and cups drifted to a nearby pageboy's tray. "That is a peace offering intended for someone else." With that, he waved another pageboy over with a fresh jug of wine for Yunhai.

"Peace offering? Who dared to ask you for a peace offering? A fine wine ought to be enjoyed with a fine beauty on a beautiful night like this. Why waste it on an apology?" Yunhai griped quietly as he poured himself a cup of wine.

Most people with wine in their bellies spoke only of their discontent. After three cups of wine, Yunhai was drunk but still said nothing of his sorrows. He just grouched about how the newer vintages of wine were less refreshingly sweet than the wines of yesteryear. Three cups down, and he was already drunk.

He raised his glass to clink it against Rex Spiritus's.

"I'm so envious of you. You never have to worry about who is or

isn't burning incense at your altars, and still you'll outlive all the gods of the Spirit Terrace."

Before Rex Spiritus could reply, the little pageboy spoke up, perplexed. "Why would my lord need to outlive the Spirit Terrace?"

Yunhai laughed and pinched the pageboy's cheek. Hugging the wine jug, he said, "The pageboys of the Spirit Terrace are little curmudgeons. They're nowhere near as cute and clever as the ones here at the Seat of Spring Breeze."

Rex Spiritus did not deny it. "That's only natural. They're brought up by me, after all."

The pageboy ran off rubbing his pinched cheek only to smack headlong into a pair of long legs at the door.

"Aiyo!" he cried out.

Rex Spiritus raised his eyes. Yunhai followed his gaze to find the Tianxiu Immortal standing at the door, having just lifted the curtain. His gaze swept the room, then landed on the jug of wine in Yunhai's arms.

"You tore a leaf from my celestial bamboo and stuck a note to my pageboy's forehead just to summon me here for *this*?" the Tianxiu Immortal said.

An inebriated Yunhai looked between Rex Spiritus and the Tianxiu Immortal and laughed. "That's the most words I've ever heard the Tianxiu Immortal speak. How rare! Seems I've broadened my horizons. A fine wine for a fine beauty… Rex Spiritus, your fine beauty isn't Lord Tianxiu, is it?"

The Tianxiu Immortal's expression then was something to behold.

He had moved as if to go but suddenly changed his mind. Curious about whatever further nonsense the two drunk immortals might share, he dropped the thin curtain behind him and joined them at the table.

Perhaps because of that night's many digressions, Yunhai himself had forgotten his words until reminded of them now, hundreds of years later. The Yunhai who'd hugged a wine jug and engaged in spirited conversation had become as ghastly as a ghoul; the Tianxiu Immortal who'd joined his companions for a drink against his better judgment was now just a leftover shell; and the master of the jade pavilion who'd

played host that night couldn't remember who he was. Yunhai was buried alone with his memory of the Seat of Spring Breeze; Rex Spiritus and the Tianxiu Immortal were gone.

"Out of all of us, I figured you two were the last who needed to worry about dying or deposition," Yunhai said. "I thought you'd outlive even the Spirit Terrace and the Chief Immortal himself. I never imagined…" Yunhai's soundless laughter was full of mocking scorn, but it was unclear whether that scorn was for himself or someone else. "How did you two end up like this?"

Without warning, his neck muscles twitched and his eyes trembled beneath his eyelids. "Ah!" he exclaimed, as though just recalling something. "Yes, yes. Urbs Caelestia is gone, too, so naturally there are no celestials anymore."

Wu Xingxue's forehead creased. "How did you know that Urbs Caelestia is gone?"

"Oh yeah, how *did* you find that out?" Ning Huaishan and the others around him muttered.

Several centuries had passed since Yunhai first entered this tomb. Back then, Urbs Caelestia was thriving. His offering runes may have given him sufficient energy to lure commoners here to break the formation, but no one would travel to the depths of this tomb just to update a buried fiend on current events. How had he found out that Urbs Caelestia was gone?

Wu Xingxue examined the room and noticed the runes carved into the stone walls around the hollow. The runes were so tightly spaced, he hadn't picked up on them until now—and the lines were so messy it was impossible to distinguish them from the general chaos of tremor-fissured rock.

With careful study, it became clear to him the runes were so difficult to read because there were two layers of them. A new layer of runes had been carved atop an older one. Each layer's handwriting looked too different to have been written by the same hand. If Hua Xin inscribed the old runes when he buried Yunhai in the earth, then who added the new ones? Struck with a sudden suspicion, Wu Xingxue snapped his attention to the vine-entwined Yunhai.

"I know because I've left this tomb before," Yunhai murmured, his eyes half open.

His words were plain, yet they sent a jolt of alarm through the clan initiates, who broke into a cold sweat. This fiend had left the tomb before?! They were about to draw their sword formations again when Yi Wusheng spoke in a hollow voice.

"Was it around twenty-five years ago that you left? Did you…did you come to the Hua estate? How did you manage to leave?"

Yi Wusheng tried to recall every stranger to whom the Hua Clan had extended its hospitality twenty-five years earlier. The Valley of Laments was in chaos at that time, and the Hua Clan treated so many afflicted people they'd nearly worn a hole through the estate's threshold. If this fiend had concealed himself in the crowd, it would explain how he and Hua Zhaoting had come to have offering runes on the backs of their necks.

Yunhai answered only one of his questions. "Yes. I went to the Hua estate more than once."

With these words, the vines holding Yunhai down flexed as though they had a mind of their own and struck out at the group with the howling, violent ferocity of a cyclone. The clan initiates slashed the vines with their swords, but infernal aura seeped from the severed stalks in a wave that seemed infinite. The attack caught most of them off guard, but Xiao Fuxuan had yet to sheathe his sword. Gold light crashed over the vault like a tidal wave, sundering every vine it passed. The Sword of Absolution sliced down through the cloud of split vines and infernal aura.

When it hovered above Yunhai's heart, the blade halted.

In that moment, one could hear a pin drop. Everyone held their breath. Finally, Xiao Fuxuan's low voice rang out.

"If you got out, why come back?"

Everyone paused in stunned silence before catching on.

Yeah! If he escaped, why would he come back? Why scheme for so long and take such drastic measures if not to break free from this formation and see daylight again? Ning Huaishan wondered.

On reflection, those watching realized that Yunhai's violent attack had felt less like a killing blow than it did a last gasp. Yunhai knew full well that lashing out in front of Xiao Fuxuan could only lead to his own obliteration. What was he trying to accomplish?

“Rex Spiritus and I are old friends,” Yunhai rasped. “But I don’t know you all that well, Lord Tianxiu. Don’t dwell on unnecessary sentiment when you’re on the cusp of victory.”

The vines entwining his body lashed out and wound themselves around Xiao Fuxuan’s sword. Bursting immediately from the celestial energy they could not hold, they plunged the blade ruthlessly down. There was a squelch.

The sensation of the celestial sword piercing Yunhai’s heart was surprisingly cold. It reminded him of the celadon-gray skies over the Valley of Laments centuries ago. Hua Xin’s sword, with its intricately carved hilt of coiling peach blossoms, was not so icy.

Yunhai didn’t know how he’d survived Hua Xin’s fatal blow nor what Hua Xin had done once he fell into his long sleep. He only knew that, one day, he opened his eyes as if startled awake from a dream and found himself in darkness. Runic symbols surrounded him, and he could not move at all. When he was beside himself with agitation and his infernal energies surged, he heard a voice both distant and near—a voice he knew better than any other and would never forget, no matter how many lifetimes might pass.

“Yunhai, my disciple,” the voice said.

He calmed upon hearing those repeated words, but sometimes, he could not control himself. Such was the plight of those on the infernal path. At the pinnacle of his fiendish cultivation, he no longer knew whether he had mastered the malicious energy or whether it had mastered him. Once again, he felt his soul split in two. One half said, *I’m leaving. What can anyone do to stop me?* The other half said, *You cannot.*

People often passed through the Valley of Laments. The moment the formation weakened, he sent a wisp of spiritual consciousness from the tomb to latch on to a random passerby. Catching the scent of a living mortal, he realized he’d gone hungry far too long. That day, he haunted the altar in the shrine, looking down on those who came to pray and make offerings just as his idol once did, jeering as he marked them.

You really are the same fiend you always were, the other half of his soul said.

Reaping the benefits of the offering runes, Yunhai began to

employ other methods to ensure an uninterrupted supply of living spiritual energy that didn't require him to lift a finger. He managed to gather enough strength to attach himself to the living once more and leave the valley. Looking around at a world that had long since become foreign to him, he was unsure where he should go. Before he could really think it over, he found himself standing in the main hall of the Hua estate, staring quietly at the portrait hanging inside.

In that moment, his infernal half had the upper hand. The other half was furious with shame.

Why do you care so much about a person who wants to kill you? the wicked half of his soul sneered.

But I'm not dead, not completely, the other half said.

Do you want to die again just so you can express your true feelings? I'll never let you have your way.

Thereafter, the infernal wisp of his soul committed many evil deeds. At first, he did so out of fiendish instinct, but later he did so in part to see if he could lure Hua Xin from Urbs Caelestia to scold or kill him once again. He was fine with either.

That day never came. Every time his spiritual core was nearly exhausted, he fled back to the tomb to gather more nourishment. When he slept, he had no idea how much time passed above; it could be several months or several years. He left and returned aimlessly many times, until one day he found himself once again standing before Hua Xin's portrait in the Hua estate's main hall, lost in thought. An initiate of the Hua Clan approached him.

"Sir, is something troubling you?" the initiate asked. "Are you here to see Dr. Yi Wusheng about somniamancy, or is it something else?"

Yunhai had no idea who Yi Wusheng was and barely listened to the initiate. He stood there in a daze for a while before asking, "Is Chief Immortal Mingwu doing well of late?"

The initiate's eyes widened. "Sir, Urbs Caelestia fell years ago! The Twelve Immortals of the Spirit Terrace no longer exist, and the Chief Immortal perished alongside them."

Yunhai did not recall how he broke away from the living body that day nor whether he caused any harm. He couldn't even remember

how he returned to the Valley of Laments. He only knew the feeling that, though the world was vast, it amounted to nothing without Hua Xin. What was so good about daylight? It was nothing compared to the darkness of his deep tomb beneath the Valley of Laments, where at least he could still hear Hua Xin's voice.

His bifurcated soul was never so intensely of two minds. One half longed to escape, while the other wanted to rest here forever. Sometimes he was Yunhai, Hua Xin's disciple, and other times he was Yunhai the fiend; at times he was lucid and at other times frenzied. Sometimes he used every last bit of sorcery he knew against the layers of suppression. Other times, he added runes to strengthen Hua Xin's weakening formation.

He'd been in a contest with his own will for more than twenty years, and he'd had enough. Now that the formation had scattered, he would never hear Hua Xin's voice again. There was nothing left here for him but a mercifully quick death by the sword of an old friend. From this moment on, the boundless possibilities of existence no longer concerned him.

Chapter 29:
Fragments

As the vital energy in Yunhai's body dissipated, the calamitous waves of infernal aura fell back to the earth. Other than looking truly spent, his appearance didn't change much. The vines wrapping his body withered rapidly, and only now could everyone see that they grew from his heart. They must have been symbiotic with Yunhai, and his death sapped their life away. The vines around Xiao Fuxuan's sword loosened, shriveled, then slipped from the blade. Only the flower branch was unchanged. Its leaves and stem still encircled Yunhai's neck. Its blossoms veiled the ghoulish half of his face.

Everyone was in shock. No one had expected Yunhai to choose suicide. Xiao Fuxuan withdrew his sword and straightened, then his brows knitted together.

Wu Xingxue stared at Yunhai's lifeless face for a long time.

"Is there any remnant of his soul left?"

Xiao Fuxuan's sword had pierced Yunhai's heart, so he was acutely attuned to whether anything remained. He shook his head. "His soul and consciousness have been annihilated."

Once the vines scattered, Yunhai's body was exposed. The corner of an identification tablet hanging from his belt was visible beneath black robes. Yi Wusheng recognized it.

"That's our clan's identification tablet!" Yi Wusheng cried out softly.

The Hua Clan's identification tablets and sword pendants were made of purple jadeite engraved with peach blossoms. Among the many cultivation clans, the design had a distinct charm, so they were immediately recognizable. Only Hua Clan disciples carried these identification tablets. Elders or clan leaders like Yi Wusheng and Hua Zhaoting didn't need one for people to know who they were. Yi Wusheng certainly never expected someone who'd been both a celestial and a fiend would have one.

Wu Xingxue flipped the tablet over and saw the name *Hai* written

upon it in slender letters. “Who inscribed this name? Was it a former leader of your clan?”

Yi Wusheng shook his head. “No. It’s written in the disciple’s own hand.”

“So this would be Yunhai’s handwriting.”

“Correct.”

“Ah.”

Then I’m not mistaken, he thought. Earlier, he’d noted that there were two layers of runes inside the hollow. The handwriting on the top layer was slender like the writing on the tablet and was likely Yunhai’s.

In the bloody earth beneath Yunhai’s left hand, they found the eye of the formation. The eye comprised two keystones: One had already crumbled to pieces, while the other had been set there later and was still intact. The latter was also marked with *Hai* in the same handwriting as the identification tablet.

Everyone had wondered why the formation’s eye was placed so plainly at the center of the sepulchral formation. Seeing the keystone, all was crystal clear: The one who reinforced the formation’s suppressive seal was Yunhai himself.

“This is…” Yi Wusheng held the keystone, a complicated expression on his face—perhaps regret, perhaps something else. At last, he sighed, shook his head, and sighed again. “It’s a pity.”

Out of everyone assembled, Yi Wusheng was the last person who should have compassion for Yunhai. After all, Yunhai’s mark on the nape of Yi Wusheng’s neck was to blame for his decades of struggle and pain. Everyone else might feel melancholy over Yunhai’s plight, but Yi Wusheng? No one would hold it against him were he to draw his sword and take out his anguish on Yunhai’s corpse.

He did no such thing. He only sighed and offered the fiend his pity.

Staring at the back of Yi Wusheng’s scarred neck, Wu Xingxue felt a similar emotion. He wondered how much he’d dealt with Yi Wusheng of the Hua Clan in his forgotten past. Probably not much; after all, Yi Wusheng was a cultivation clan disciple while Wu Xingxue was an archfiend.

It really is a pity… It wouldn’t be so bad to have a friend like him.

Yi Wusheng crouched down and buried the keystone once more under Yunhai's palm. Unearthing and reburying it disturbed a lot of bloodied dirt, and he was about to sweep it back over the keystone when two fingers stopped him. He looked up to find the one stopping him was Xiao Fuxuan.

"Lord Immortal?"

"Something is in there," Xiao Fuxuan replied, brushing aside some of the thick dirt. Nothing was there.

Everyone exchanged a perplexed glance. Wu Xingxue stooped down next to him.

"What is it?"

Xiao Fuxuan did not reply right away. Digging was getting him nowhere, so he crooked a finger and tapped the ground with a knuckle. Yunhai's body was still, yet the dirt all around him trembled, the tremors pushing whatever was buried below to the surface. It was white—warm and lustrous in contrast to the dark earth surrounding it. Wu Xingxue was particularly perceptive to that color and knew at first glance it was white jade. Xiao Fuxuan fished it from the dirt.

It was a white-jade bell that resembled the one from the Hua estate, yet a careful examination revealed it was far more intricate. The jade was etched with fine openwork silver filigree just like Rex Spiritus's sword hilt and mask. One could tell at a glance that they belonged to the same person.

"The Dreambell!" Yi Wusheng blurted.

With the Dreambell in front of them, it was evident that the bell from the Hua estate was a fraud. Just as Yi Wusheng surmised, Hua Zhaoting had worn the Dreambell at his side. The only one who could swap it was the fiend who manipulated him, so while finding the Dreambell in Yunhai's tomb was hardly surprising, Yi Wusheng could not fathom why he had taken it.

"What…what use could he have had for the Dreambell?"

The bell had no use aside from weaving dreams, either making the past seem like a dream or making a new dream seem like reality. Yunhai had refused the Dreambell's power even as his godhood was destroyed, so why take it from the Hua estate and replace it with a fake? Clearly, Yunhai had given it a lot of thought.

Did he change his mind? wondered Wu Xingxue. *Did he suddenly find life in this tomb unbearable, worse than being banished from heaven or falling back to the mortal world? Did he hope to use the Dreambell to weave himself an elaborate dream?*

Yunhai was dead—his soul and consciousness annihilated, according to Xiao Fuxuan—so he could not answer. Wu Xingxue would never know if he'd guessed right. He was lost in thought when he heard a deep voice say his name.

He looked up.

Xiao Fuxuan, the white jade bell still resting on his finger, straightened up. "Hold out your hand."

"What?" Wu Xingxue was confused, but he extended an open hand. Coolness filled the center of his palm as Xiao Fuxuan laid the Dreambell there.

The truth was, Wu Xingxue remembered nothing at all, neither Rex Spiritus nor the Dreambell itself. Yet, as the bell met his hand, he blinked, feeling a surprising note of nostalgia. He rolled the bell over his palm and inspected it closely. There were fissures inside. He pinched the bell between two fingers and brought it closer for a better look when, suddenly, images began to flash through his mind.

Yi Wusheng once said that a dream induced by the Dreambell could only be unwoven by the Dreambell itself, lest the dreamer's soul return incomplete or their memories be warped. The Dreambell looked damaged, and he had no idea how to undo its effect—yet somehow he could already sense it. Turning the Dreambell between his fingers, Wu Xingxue recollected the fragmented images that had flashed through his mind earlier.

It had been a winter night. For no discernible reason, he stood by the door with his hands behind his back, something hard and cool in his hand, its pointed corner digging into his palm. Xiao Fuxuan was at the door, holding aside the curtain, neither coming in nor leaving. His dark, half-lidded eyes watched Wu Xingxue. Behind him was a massive courtyard, and in its center, a towering tree. Snow weighed heavily on its branches. With his fingers wrapped around that cool something, Wu Xingxue quietly faced Xiao Fuxuan.

"Did you know that fiends are driven by carnal desires, Xiao

Fuxuan?" Wu Xingxue asked, his head tilted a little.

Xiao Fuxuan continued to hold the curtain in silence until he finally said, "I do."

Wu Xingxue paused for a split second. "You knew, and yet you still chose to come here today. Am I to understand that you want to be a guest behind this archfiend's bed curtains?"

Wu Xingxue said nothing. The disjointed images were shockingly vivid, and the words *"A guest behind this archfiend's bed curtains"* made his fingers quiver. When he raised his head, Xiao Fuxuan's face was before him again—the same as the one glimpsed in his fleeting memories. Wu Xingxue stood still. Ultimately, he slid the Dreambell back into Xiao Fuxuan's hand.

Chapter 30:
Shattered Bell

XIAO FUXUAN GLANCED DOWN at the Dreambell in his hand, then back at Wu Xingxue. Before he could say anything, Wu Xingxue spoke.

"Take it back. What'd you give it to me for?"

Xiao Fuxuan didn't answer.

The cultivation clan initiates had exceptional memories. They recognized the bell from Yunhai's reckoning and recalled that it was a celestial relic belonging to Rex Spiritus. Still believing Yi Wusheng's cover story, they quietly praised Wu Xingxue among themselves.

"What a remarkable character! Most people's eyes would pop out of their sockets at the mere sight of such a rare celestial relic, and they'd never let it go. He wasn't bewitched by greed at all—he just gave it right back!"

Everyone else was speechless. Xiao Fuxuan glanced sidelong at the initiates, one of whom continued to marvel.

"Honestly, hand to my heart, if it had been me, I'd never go that far, I—huh?"

Flinching under the Tianxiu Immortal's sidelong glance, the initiates realized their private discussion had been overheard. One of them blushed and pointed at Yi Wusheng.

"He told us earlier that Wu—" Unable to say the archfiend's name to his face, he stopped after the first syllable. "*He's* not actually the real thing but a mortal soul that accidentally inhabited the wrong body."

Yi Wusheng was surprised. Rubbing his face with his hands, he thought, *These initiates are far too easy to fool.*

The initiate grew redder and redder the longer everyone stared.

"Um…our master once told us that some celestial relics fell to the mortal realm after the loss of Urbs Caelestia," he continued frantically. "All the major clans and rogue cultivators search for them, openly and in secret. Celestial relics are incredibly rare—many hold part of a god's vital essence or eons of collected spiritual energy—so of course

everyone wants them. But you could count on one hand the people capable of carrying a relic on their person. Without a foundation of at least a century of cultivation, no one could withstand that much celestial energy. His living soul is just an ordinary mortal's, so he isn't capable of carrying that bell, but many who know better would struggle to overcome the desire to keep a relic that powerful. That's why it's so admirable he let it go."

The initiate concluded his rambling explanation with a refined, cupped-fist salute toward Wu Xingxue.

While Wu Xingxue was cracking up in his head, his face remained composed. He suavely returned the salute. "You flatter me."

The already speechless Xiao Fuxuan went numb. Wu Xingxue stared at his cold, expressionless face and nearly doubled over with suppressed laughter. Then, out of nowhere, he once more recalled those words—*"A guest behind this archfiend's bed curtains"*—and the image of the bed itself…

It stopped him in his tracks and silenced his internal laughter.

As in the carriage earlier, Xiao Fuxuan did not unmask Wu Xingxue. He listened to the initiate ramble, rolling the Dreambell between his fingers aimlessly. Between his slender fingers, the Dreambell appeared even more exquisitely delicate, its gleaming jade lustrous and translucent.

Perhaps the initiate's words were to blame. He'd said that celestial relics often held some of a celestial's vital essence. Wu Xingxue couldn't recall what a vital essence was, but for some reason, he felt a connection between his spiritual core and the Dreambell. Now, watching Xiao Fuxuan's fingers play with the bell…

He watched for a moment, then reached out and snatched it back. Having just finished praising his restraint, the initiates were bewildered.

Xiao Fuxuan turned to Wu Xingxue. "Weren't you going to return it to me?"

"I've changed my mind."

"How come?"

Wu Xingxue gave Xiao Fuxuan a long, silent look. He couldn't exactly tell him the truth: *I couldn't handle watching you play with the Dreambell like that.* If he did, he was certain Xiao Fuxuan would ask

why, subjecting him to further indignity. And the Tianxiu Immortal was certainly capable of that.

"It just so happened to occur to me that I shouldn't be giving it to *you*." With that, he turned and offered the Dreambell to Yi Wusheng.

Yi Wusheng gawked at it. *There's no need for that!*

"Doctor," Wu Xingxue said, "you mentioned before we left that you wanted to go to the Valley of Laments for two reasons: to learn how you received the marking on the back of your neck, and to recover the true Dreambell for the Hua Clan."

Yi Wusheng waved him away, thinking, *You and the Tianxiu Immortal can bicker about this all you like, but I'm just an innocent mortal. Please leave me out of it.*

But Wu Xingxue wouldn't let him be.

"Why are you refusing me, Doctor? This Dreambell belonged to the Hua Clan. Now that we've recovered it, you should have it."

Yi Wusheng responded with silence. Back at the Hua estate, when they'd first discovered the real Dreambell was missing, he'd immediately accused Wu Xingxue of the theft—right in front of Wu Xingxue's face. He could suppress his embarrassment so long as it went undiscussed, but now that Wu Xingxue had brought it up, Yi Wusheng wished for nothing more than a nice hole to bury himself in.

Following his accusation, Yi Wusheng said he wanted to come to the Valley of Laments to find the Dreambell and return it to the Hua Clan. But after Yunhai's reckoning proved that Rex Spiritus was the relic's rightful owner, Yunhai had looked at Wu Xingxue and called him Rex Spiritus. Yi Wusheng had never read of Rex Spiritus nor his exalted status in *The Book of Gods*, and he knew even less about how the divine immortal came to be an infamous archfiend; the only thing he knew was that the Dreambell belonged to him. When Xiao Fuxuan placed the Dreambell in Wu Xingxue's hand, he'd returned it to its rightful owner.

Now, the rightful owner was playing dumb for some obscure purpose and seemed dead set on giving the Dreambell to Yi Wusheng. Did he dare to take it? No, he did not!

Besides, he was far too ashamed to accept. Yi Wusheng had a scholar's disposition and was especially easy to embarrass. When they were young, Hua Zhaoting and Hua Zhaotai found this very amusing

and often teased him until he was red to the tips of his ears. But the siblings matured day by day, and Yi Wusheng became elder of the fourth hall and gained his own reputation. Eventually, their teasing stopped, and no one had dared tease him in such a way since. It had been ages since he felt so flustered. Had there been any blood inside his body, he would've blushed.

The widely circulated rumor had it that the archfiend Wu Xingxue robbed the Hua Clan of a relic they'd received through a fortuitous celestial encounter. How ironic to discover that Wu Xingxue had simply taken back what was his—and that the Hua Clan's so-called celestial encounter might have more nefarious implications. Under the circumstances, Yi Wusheng didn't dare accept the Dreambell.

Were it not for Wu Xingxue's adamant refusal to admit he wasn't possessed, and the Tianxiu Immortal's sword forcing Yi Wusheng to play along, and the proximity of the easily frightened initiates, Yi Wusheng would have fallen to his knees and begged Wu Xingxue for mercy. Instead, he stared at Wu Xingxue, his eyes gradually growing more aggrieved. At last, he took the paper between his fingers again.

"Sir, all that's left of me is this soul remnant" was what he said, but he meant *Please choose someone else to torment.*

Seeing his expression, Wu Xingxue reflected on his actions and realized he was being a bit of a bully. He thus reached his fiendish claw out to his two underlings. He'd always been lazy and disliked having to carry anything, so Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu were surely used to serving as his purse. As soon as he turned his head their way, however, he was greeted with Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu's equally aggrieved faces.

Wu Xingxue was puzzled. "I haven't even said anything to you yet."

"Ar—our Mr. Cheng," Ning Huaishan said, "don't you remember? Fiends throw up at the mere sight of an idol." His expression was practically a flashing sign reading *Would you like to see how much I'd vomit if I were holding a celestial relic?*

This hadn't occurred to Wu Xingxue.

All right. Having tormented everyone around him in turn, the greater archfiend Wu Xingxue decided to carry the Dreambell himself.

They now had everything they'd sought from the Valley of

Laments: an explanation for the invocation incidents, the source of the mark on Yi Wusheng's neck, and the Dreambell. Neither the initiates nor Yi Wusheng could ask for anything more. But Wu Xingxue still wondered how Hua Xin had managed to keep Yunhai alive—something even Yunhai could not explain.

Also, Xiao Fuxuan said he was in the Northern Domain of Tealspire when Hua Xin came down to the mortal realm. When he returned to Urbs Caelestia, a long time had passed, and no one knew what Hua Xin had done. All they knew was that, just like Yunhai, Hua Xin went to the Spirit Terrace to receive heavenly punishment, then spent a hundred days in isolated cultivation. Thereafter, aside from appearing even more divine and chiefly, everything about him seemed normal.

They searched Yunhai's tomb a little more but, failing to find any further clues, decided to move on. When they emerged from the catacombs, dawn was breaking in the east. The three initiates began to pack their bottomless bag of holding with the bodies of the commoners tragically taken by invocation. With mumbled apologies, the initiates dropped the remains into the bag.

"When you get back, don't forget to make them look more presentable. At least use an illusion," Yi Wusheng reminded them, looking worried. Most of the commoners were beheaded, their gruesome deaths evident from their mangled corpses. It would be cruel to return them to their families that way.

One initiate bowed. "Don't worry, sir. We'll make sure to use the proper rites and help them find peace."

Their senior disciples had traveled to this area so many times to no avail, and the initiates had succeeded in a single trip. This was a significant event to their clan and to the city of Brightwater itself. They invited Xiao Fuxuan and the others to return with them, but they tactfully declined.

Well, they would have, if Xiao Fuxuan hadn't answered with an abrupt "No thanks" first.

Wu Xingxue smoothed this over a bit, pointing to his own face. "If I visit your clan, I'll scare your leader and elders to death."

The initiates had no rebuttal.

Yi Wusheng's response was the most graceful of the three. "All

that's left of me is a soul remnant. I won't last many more days, so I won't impose."

Hearing this, the initiates didn't dare hold him back any longer. They bowed, said their farewells, and set off for Brightwater with their bag of holding and all thirty-three souls of the departed.

"What are your plans now, Doctor?" Wu Xingxue asked Yi Wusheng.

Yi Wusheng brushed his fingers over the black cloth on his face. He knew very well he was growing weaker by the day. In the carriage on the way to the valley, he was still able to perform an examination by touch, but his strength was already flagging by the time they reached the catacombs. Now, none of his five senses were as perceptive as they used to be.

He turned to Xiao Fuxuan. "Lord Immortal, how many more days will my soul remnant last?"

Xiao Fuxuan pressed his finger to Yi Wusheng.

"Four days," he intoned after a moment.

Yi Wusheng nodded calmly. "Okay." He addressed Wu Xingxue next. "I still have some unfinished business. I'll head to Twilight Fen first, then back toward Peach Blossom Isle. If I'm lucky, I might make it home for the last day."

Suddenly, he smiled wryly. He'd been sincere when he'd grabbed Wu Xingxue by the hem and begged him for death. Now that he had only a few days left to live, he longed for more time. Before, he thought finding the source of the Hua Clan's suffering or tracking down the Dreambell would bring him peace. Having settled the last of his unfinished business, he'd come up with more.

Ah, people. We're never satisfied.

Finished with his self-ridicule, he gave Wu Xingxue and Xiao Fuxuan a genteel, graceful bow as if to say, *Here we part ways.* But after a few steps, his anxiety returned.

Unable to contain himself, he walked back and said to Wu Xingxue, "This is going to sound a little presumptuous, but I wonder if…"

He knew that Wu Xingxue had forgotten many things, which might include the Dreambell's proper usage. He wanted to say, *I wonder*

if you remember how to use this Dreambell or how this dream might be undone, but he found it difficult to ask this of the Dreambell's rightful owner.

Wu Xingxue noticed Yi Wusheng's reluctance and how, as he trailed off midsentence, the archfiend looked at the Dreambell. He crooked a finger and held up the bell. "Did you want to ask about this?"

Yi Wusheng nodded, but as he considered his words, shock registered in his eyes.

"Why is the Dreambell cracked?!" he exclaimed. "It looked fine back in the tomb!"

Wu Xingxue didn't seem surprised at its condition. "It was already cracked on the inside, it just hadn't spread to the outside yet. Fortunately, it's still mostly intact. I wonder if I can still use it."

"Absolutely not," Yi Wusheng said immediately.

"Why not?"

"It's a celestial relic. A relic's vital energy is already too great, and this one is infused with a god's vital essence, so there will be many rites and taboos regarding its use. If anything whatsoever is out of place, it may not merely fail—it could lead to an energy deviation."

As reasonable as his concerns might have been, when it came to celestial relics, a celestial would know best. After examining the white jade bell, Wu Xingxue turned to Xiao Fuxuan.

"Yes," said Xiao Fuxuan. "That is indeed the case."

Yi Wusheng knew full well that this was an understatement; if something went wrong, the consequences would be far worse than energy deviation. Celestial relics were impossibly rare in the mortal realm, and they were almost as rare in the heavens. Should the Dreambell be destroyed, it would be nearly impossible to restore, even if one scoured both heaven and earth.

Yet Wu Xingxue was oblivious. He held up the bell and shook it lightly, caught in his winding thoughts.

"So, it can be restored?" he asked eventually.

No one would know the answer better than a god, so Wu Xingxue waited for Xiao Fuxuan.

Xiao Fuxuan remained silent for a time. Yi Wusheng saw the

Tianxiu Immortal's thin lips part a fraction, as if to speak the word no, but he halted and turned his face away. After another pause, he turned back to Wu Xingxue.

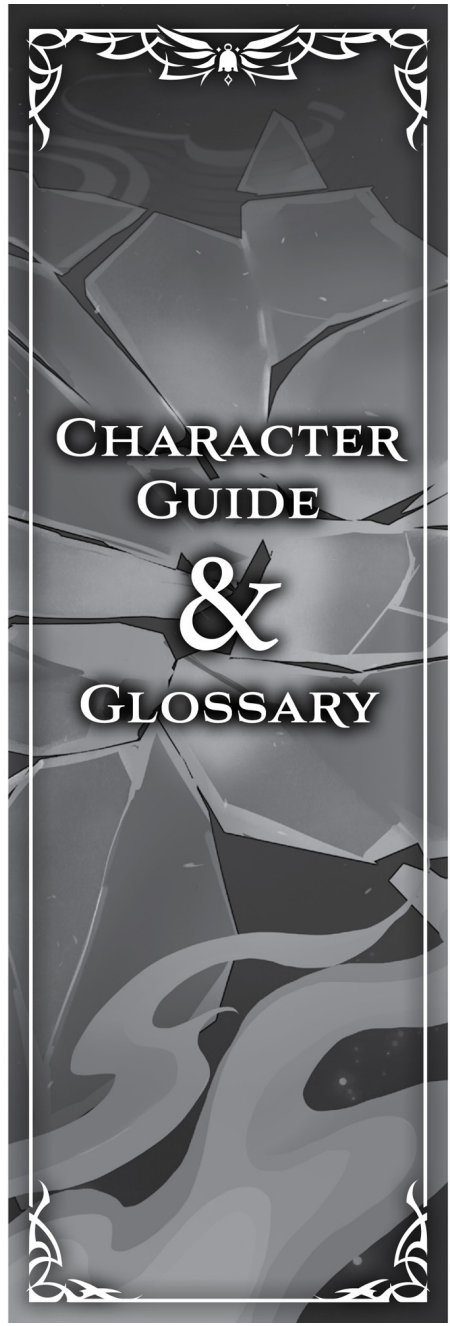
"Yes," he said.

Yi Wusheng swallowed back the word "impossible." *Is this what the gods are like?* he wondered. *Staring at someone long enough can make the "impossible" possible?*

Still, he longed to see for himself how it could be done.

An hour later, the carriage departed for the old site of the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar. Aboard were Wu Xingxue, Xiao Fuxuan, and—despite his *"Here we part ways"*—Yi Wusheng.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN
Three Hundred Years of Longing
VOLUME 2


Character
Guide
&
Glossary

SETTING

Three Hundred Years of Longing does not take place in any recognizable historical period or location; even its cultivation world is largely unlike those in its genre. The goal of cultivation is to ascend the white pagoda atop Mount Taiyin and reach apotheosis in Urbs Caelestia—which no longer exists, making celestial cultivation a dead end. The Imperial Capital fell many years ago, and the world is now overrun with fiends.

All the immortals are gone. This is a dying world.

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

WU XINGXUE 乌行雪 ("A RAVEN WHO WALKS ON SNOW"): The archon of the fiend haven Nightgleam, and the most powerful of all archfiends.

XIAO FUXUAN 萧复暄 ("THE RETURN OF WARMTH TO DESOLATION"): The Tianxiu Immortal. Tianxiu (天宿) is the mansion that houses all the constellations. His title reads as: *All the stars in the sky.* His courtesy name, Mian—*absolution*—is also the name of his sword.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

AYAO 阿杳: Yi Wusheng's disciple who has gone mad.

FANG CHU 方储: An underling of Wu Xingxue. Initially known by his missing arm.

FENG JUYAN 封居燕: The current matriarch of the Feng Clan of cultivators.

GAO E 高娥: A commoner searching for her missing daughters in the Valley of Laments.

HUA XIN 花信: The Chief Immortal of the Spirit Terrace, with the Daoist name Mingwu—*clarity of emptiness.*

HUA ZHAOTAI 花照台: The current patriarch of the Hua clan.

HUA ZHAOTING 花照亭: Yi Wusheng's wife and Hua Zhaotai's younger sister. Deceased.

NING HUAISHAN 宁怀衫: An underling of Wu Xingxue. Appears around fourteen years of age due to poisoning.

REX SPIRITUS: The first of all invoked celestials, courtesy name Zhao—*luminous.*

YI WUQI 医梧栖: Yi Wusheng's older brother. Deceased.

YI WUSHENG 医梧生: An alchemist of the Hua Clan who specializes in somniamancy.

YUNHAI 云骇: A former celestial. His name was given by his master, Hua Xin.

ZHAO QINGLAI 赵青来: A commoner searching for a lost loved one in the Valley of Laments.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names from *Three Hundred Years of Longing.*

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NOTE ON SPELLING

Romanized Mandarin Chinese words with identical spelling in pinyin—and even pronunciation—may well have different meanings. These words are more easily differentiated in written Chinese, which uses logographic characters.

Wū Xíngxuě

Wū as in s**woo**p

Xíng as in **shing**, xu as **shoo**, ě as in **err**or

Xiāo Fùxuān

Xi as in **she**, āo as in **out**

Fù as in **foo**d (but keep it short), x as in **sh**ut, uān as in **when**

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **ewe**

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

GLOSSARY

ARCANE FORMATIONS: Spells cast by placing items in specific configurations, usually finalized with a keystone or talisman.

COURTESY NAME: In this story, a name given upon invocation that demonstrates respect.

CULTIVATION/CULTIVATORS: In this story, there are around a hundred cultivation clans in the world, and two ways of achieving apotheosis: by the sword or by alchemy. Both involve strengthening one's celestial core. When a cultivator coalesces their vital energies into a celestial core, they can ascend to the white pagoda atop Mount Taiyin and through the gates of Urbs Caelestia. There, they undergo a ceremony at the Spirit Terrace, receive a set of heavenly edicts, and become immortal celestials. They are then commissioned either to act as a numen of a place or to oversee an idea. To mortals, celestials are gods. Since the destruction of Urbs Caelestia, cultivators can no longer become celestials, so many follow the infernal path and become fiends instead.

ERA NAME: Usually named for an emperor, but now named by cultivation clans. The current era is "Cataclysm," named for Urbs Caelestia's destruction.

FIEND: Infernally aligned creatures, often once human but not always, and distinct from ghosts and ghouls. Examples include huskreavers, which devour beings from the inside out, and necromancers, who use sorcery to control the dead. Fiends cultivate an infernal core by absorbing living vital energy.

GHOUL: Creatures originating from the dead. They feed on vital energies, flesh, and bones of the living.

HEAVENLY EDICTS: Orders given to celestials by the Heavenly Principles.

HEAVENLY PRINCIPLES: The natural law that governs all. Heavenly mandates or punishments are backed by the Heavenly Principles.

HEAVENLY TRIBULATIONS: Trials given to cultivators so they can gain strength. In this story, they act as punishments and only arise due to karmic retribution.

JOSS STICKS: Incense burned as offerings to gods (celestials). Without offerings, celestials are demoted and can lose their celestial core.

MERIDIANS: Body channels and points mapped like constellations on the body that channel vital energy.

NECROMANCY: The manipulation of dead bodies for infernal cultivation.

NUMEN: A celestial with spiritual influence over a place.

PHANTOM SWORDS: Sword cultivators create tangible phantom copies of their weapons, which can be sent flying.

PUPPETS: Lifelike bodies made of paper talismans, folded like origami and animated by thaumaturgy. Can be controlled but are limited in action.

REVENANT: Ghosts lingering in the mortal world due to a desire for vengeance.

SOMNIAMANCY: The study of souls and their travel through dreams.

Yi Wusheng is the only known expert.

SORCERY: The power wielded by fiends.

THAUMATURGY: The power wielded by celestials.

VITAL ENERGY: A force that exists in everyone. Can be focused and used as a force or as a softer but tangible aura that feels like a change in air pressure. Some techniques deplete it and require recovery time, such as Xiao Fuxuan's Fate's Victoria, and must be used sparingly.

WARDS/RESTRICTIONS: Persistent spells restricting movement between locations, usually placed on doors or borders.

An Archfiend Awakens

Floating above the Boundless Sea is Tealspire—a towering, thirty-three-story prison built to contain fiends, where the damned are forgotten and demons waste away. At its summit, Wu Xingxue awakens with blood on his hands, chains at his feet, and no memory of how he arrived. The life he once led as a nobleman of Magpie Haven is gone, replaced by confinement and confusion.

Disoriented and stripped of everything, Wu Xingxue is no longer a pampered aristocrat—he's an archfiend. But fate has other plans. His awakening stirs the legendary Tianxiu Immortal, Xiao Fuxuan: a cold, enigmatic figure with the word *Mian* etched into his neck, wielding a power steeped in divine judgment.

As Tealspire begins to collapse around them, the two must forge a reluctant alliance to survive its fall—and face whatever awaits below. Yet the mysteries only deepen. Why did Tealspire fall? What became of Wu Xingxue's former life? And who, truly, is the Tianxiu Immortal?

A HAUNTING TALE OF EVERLASTING LOVE
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